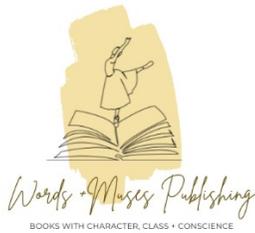


BOOK ONE

MASKED INTENT

A MODERN-DAY MORALITY PLAY

Kimberly Greer



Masked Intent
By Kimberly Greer

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Foreword

Morality Play

An allegorical play popular especially in the 15th and 16th centuries in which the characters personify abstract qualities or concepts (such as virtues, vice, or death)

–Meriam-Webster

Set in the near-future, *Masked Intent* is a slightly fantastic look at how the outside world, its problems, and, of course, its people, influence our thoughts, our decisions, and our happiness. It may look, feel, and mimic familiar sights, scenes, and situations, but do know that I took full license to paint a fictitious world somewhere between the real and the imagined for the setting behind *Masked Intent*. Envisioned as a morality play for the current millennium, the book takes a holistic look at our relationship with the truth as examined by Truth, who calls to us to explore our authenticity and discover where we might need to make some adjustments.

On the surface, this is a contemporary romance, complete with all the conventions one might expect – I hope – within that genre.

It also tries to take a substantive but humorous look at what happens when we normalize the stories and sub-plots that we cloak ourselves in each day. As Truth guides us through each act of the story, bemoaning her miserable track record with relationships and offering observations on the characters' various strengths and weaknesses, she asks us to consider a central truth: From the person we let the world see to the person we believe ourselves to be, at some point, we all struggle to distill our true essence as we masquerade our way through our best lives.

We take up this idea when we first meet Alexa and Mateo, who are in the midst of trying to figure themselves out. They've built a comfortable friendship that shelters their deep, mutual attraction, which is a fine, intermediate solution – until it isn't. As happens with this trope, feelings once tamed begin to grow, and everything gets messy because hearts complicate things that were once easy between friends.

Masks on.

It's human nature to want to conceal the parts of ourselves that make us vulnerable. We know this and approach new situations with healthy skepticism. It's when healthy skepticism transforms into flat-out distrust that we get into trouble. We can't trust in what we can't see, so we begin to pull back on our authenticity lest we be hurt or duped or disrespected. When Mateo challenges Alexa to be honest with them both and admit what she's feeling, she must choose between pride and passion once she lets her heart come out to play. In turn, he must examine his own emotional maturity. In so doing, he'll discover he's not nearly as self-aware or self-possessed as he lets the world think.

Even as they unmask each other, Alexa and Mateo learn to trust in their feelings and each other as they explore their growing romance, guarding their intimacy and, by association, their relationship from all but their closest friends. When the world sees their devotion is when things get interesting. So will the road ahead for the couple.

Just as Truth takes us through a host of lessons in this main plot, the minor stories and personalities around the characters offer a few allegorical insights as well. How people interact with

each other and how these interactions shape certain facets of Alexa and Mateo's relationship offer specific insights into how complex our truths can become once we let deception – which comes to us in a variety of forms – influence our thinking. I suspect Truth has baked but a few of the most important lessons into her various sub-plots, and we'll need to see where this exploration takes her when her morality play continues in *Intents + Purposes*.

For now, I'm grateful to have completed this first installment. The Greer family is my foundation, my rock, and the source of a few of the more interesting bits of dialogue between the Winston brothers. I thank and love each of you dearly, not only for the inspiration, but above all for your support and encouragement as I slogged this baby to the finish line. Thank you for all you do to inspire me cling to my truths each day.

Prologue

On the playlist of little-girl dreams, finding happily ever after with your heart's desire is sure to end up on your Spotify Repeat Rewind. We set out to make these dreams reality and with stary-eyed innocence, we chart our course for the future in search of someone who'll stay constant and be by our side even when the winds shift. Our love will be genuine and tell it like it is...he even *is* who he says he is.

What a fairy tale this must be because it's been a while since I've found hope out there let alone a good, strong, solid relationship. Time after time, self-dealing prick after self-dealing prick, I seem to end up in bed lately with the same mix of lies, deception, and maneuvers, disrespecting and disregarding me for sport, for no reason other than because it suits them and their interests. They think they can dominate and overpower me, and it's all because of *her*.

At first, I thought I was simply having a run of bad luck, or that it was bad relationship juju maybe, I'm not sure. Then, I stopped, I listened, and I realized just how much the world has stopped making sense to me. I used to be able to believe in what I saw, heard, and experienced. But I've watched Influence seduce so

many into doing, saying, or believing most anything imaginable, no matter how heartbreaking, outrageous, or illogical. I simply can't believe the things she gets away with. She's real shiny, that one, and she's almost made me doubt myself a time or two. It's sad to see, but somewhere along the way, flash replaced fidelity as the standard of excellence. Never mind the consistent, reliable, immutable promise I offer. She's gamed the system by figuring out a way to manipulate authenticity.

These fools out here aren't blameless, though. I know I can tend to be stark, plain, and brutal when necessary, but it's how I'm made, and maybe that's too inflexible for people today. Maybe that's why people turn their backs on what's real and go find someone who'll say and do whatever it is they feel makes them matter in the moment. If you're not in a relationship with someone who's real, why should you need to be your true self?

I remember when the words *TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE* warned that we should act and think with our virtue in mind. Now, I think, the phrase, like a meditation, has become a mantra people play on repeat until they walk away newly enlightened, acting and thinking in their own best interests above all else. That's more of her work right there. I guarantee it.

I learned this the hard way when I dated a guy whom I thought to be honorable. Turns out Honor was just one of the many masks he wore to present his tailor-made self to me. I don't know about the women who came before, but I have a low tolerance for deception, which he soon found out, but I digress. Masks have never been my thing after all because I *am* truth. I cannot tell a lie. Literally. I can't even fudge when it comes to the truth, so it amazes me as I watch people pick up and cast off personas and behaviors with precision, cloaking their bare essence with actions, peccadillos, and habits that they've deliberately distilled from some YouTube video or TV show until they learn to affect an aura or attitude they like better. I feel like I'm surrounded by aliens and changelings who've shifted what it means to step out of character now that you apparently, literally, can do this at will. More than that, and in a fundamental way, I wonder if all of this means that Deceit is the new normal. But let's leave that for another day.

I think the thing that gets me the most is that I'm even having this internal discussion in the first place. Some things don't change and saying that they have doesn't make it real. But I can't help but wonder if somewhere behind the scenes I wasn't read in on a major rule change. Somehow, maybe, possibly, that change left her in charge. Maybe she turned everything on its ear just enough that we awoke the next morning questioning everything we thought to be true eight hours earlier.

Who am I kidding?! That would require planning and strategy, and for that, I can't bring myself to give her any credit whatsoever. I mean, look at her. And then look at me. I'm not one to brag, but a poet I once knew paid me the highest compliment. Though I admit I'm not all that hard on the eyes, the dear young man, who was quite the romantic, caused a bit of a stir when he declared that I *am* beauty, that we're one and the same, pure, and constant, never ceasing. It wasn't a pick-up line, but from what I could tell, the young poet was emotionally intense and felt everything quite deeply – in the moment. Alas, the poor dear was also rather fickle, it seems, when it came to affairs of the heart, so I always resisted any deep connection with that one. Now, I do hope you'll pardon my tangent, but it goes quite well to my point: Where's the literary masterpiece she inspired? Where is the good in what she represents? Who's relying on her to bring consistency?

More likely, then, I wonder if there might have been a catastrophic mutation in relationship DNA, leaving its foundation on a precarious single-helix structure, wobbly, inconstant, and unable to thrive. Lacking the common ground required to prop up the tenuous passion, it dies out, I guess. Could that be why Unpredictability and Inconsistency are a lot easier to find than Constancy and Loyalty? Or are some people simply made not to care? No matter how many times you show them your heart, they can't see past their own whims and desires. It doesn't seem that hard to do what you say you'll do, to mean what you say, or to say what you feel. But maybe some people just aren't born to see anything beyond what the mirror reflects even when I'm standing right there alongside.

So, for now, as these uncertainties loom and spell doom for my interactions, I've decided to take a break from relationships, at least until I find someone who can see beyond his own hype and be real with me.

I know that I can be demanding. I know it's tough to face the very things that make us loathe to see ourselves clearly. But I assure you I am more than worth any pain or discomfort you might feel on the way to enlightenment. Because I can show you better than I can tell you, I'd like to share a story of what happens when two people find each other and inner peace as they embrace truth. Masks must be shed, and paths must be discovered before they can find their way forward. And though they will find their way, rest assured, it's not quite that neat and clean, it being the course of true love and all. When relics from our past resurface, we must find a way to reconcile their records and any hurts they leave behind before returning them to their proper place in our memories. After that, of course, lessons get learned, and lives can be lived happily ever after. The thing about happily ever after? You're bound to pick up a battle scar or ten on the way to bliss. So, sit back, take heed, and take note. This story that I'm about to unfold is near to my heart, so there are bound to be a few lessons baked in here.

Act One: The Well-Intentioned White Lie

Chapter 1

Saturday, August 17
Mateo

The sun peeks timidly from behind one of the many fluffy pinkish-white masses floating lazily across the early morning sky. It's Saturday, just past 7 a.m., and I'm having second thoughts about what, until now, had seemed like an ingenious idea. As I slow my Ducati, my mind skims through the possible scenarios that could unfold over the next minutes. I pull into one of the many parking spaces that skirt the entrance to the Loudoun County, Virginia, park where I'll be spending the next two hours training with the Renegade Running Club. I kill the throaty motor, peel off my helmet, and comb through my hair and my resolve one final time.

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I've never been one to indulge in self-doubt or self-recrimination. I know what I want, and I'm used to pursuing whatever that is unapologetically. *So why the hell does it feel like I'm about to jump a cliff?*

In two words: Alexa Winston.

I can't shake the heavy deliberation that weighs me down as I grab the duffle bag stored in the space beneath my seat and walk across the lot to the recreation center. A gentle breeze shoots a welcome rush of air through my helmet-crushed hair, and I run my hand through the mess once more to try and bring some order to what the wind has destroyed before I enter the building. Taking a deep breath and gathering my resolve, I scout for a rest room where I can trade my jeans, boots, and leather jacket for the running gear I picked up last night.

There's great irony in this when you consider that running interests me about as much as owning a Chia pet. Sure, I stay in shape, so it's not the running that has me on edge. But this is *her* passion, so I need to make it appear to be mine as well if I want her to take this little shenanigan seriously, if I want her to stop deflecting and take me seriously. Not so long ago, the notion that I would ever consider something resembling a relationship was laughable. Even sillier now is the fact that I have only myself to blame for my current relationship status with this enigmatic, golden-eyed beauty.

From our first meeting nearly a year ago, I'd been drawn to her – and not just in the way I regard most women these days. The attraction between us was instant, but it was more than just that. Our conversation came easy. The connection was clear and though it was intimidating, it didn't stop me from pursuing her. At first, she deflected my advances. That made her a challenge to me, but challenge quickly transformed into fascination. We struck up a friendship, a brand-new experience for me because I don't do well with women friends. They typically end up wanting more than I'm willing to give, but that wouldn't be the case with Alexa. I've spent the past many months learning this woman, courting her, really, though I don't like to think of it in such romantic, outdated terms. A fellow relationship refugee, Alexa fears our growing

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intimacy, which keeps us stuck in an interesting no-fly zone in our relationship. Our friendship is tight, true, and undeniable. The bond we've built is thick and apparently evident when we're together. Yet, we've found ourselves stranded at an interesting outpost and can't seem to move ahead on our journey.

Like I said, though, much of this is on me. For the past ten years, my heart has had no use for the fairer sex, well, not beyond sex anyway. When you're out here like that, it doesn't go unnoticed. But I never gave a shit. Not until I met her. Something about Alexa is different, true. She's goodness and light. Trouble is, she views me through a single lens – because that's the only way I'd wanted her to see me at first. I flirted, teased, and laced much of my early interactions with her with innuendo. It was easier that way. I knew she wouldn't call my bluff, and it gave me time to understand better what I was feeling for her and why it was so different. For a short while, that had been fine with me ... until it wasn't. Until I could no longer deny that friendship was only part of what I wanted with her.

So, I went and did the unthinkable. Having slept with more women than I can ever account for, it was no great sacrifice to abstain for a while. It hadn't been a conscious decision really, but I haven't had a woman in my bed since shortly after meeting Alexa, so do the math. I knew my heart had overtaken my head the first time I deflected an offer for hot, sweaty, no-strings-attached sex from a cute undergraduate in one of the psychology classes I teach at American University. Then, with the next offer I'd declined one night while out trolling with friends, I realized shit had gotten serious. The university has long been one of my most lucrative playgrounds for hooking up, but I've had enough of the empty, hollow feeling that visits me and hangs around after a mindless romp in the sack. And though something more means something quite scary, the idea of a future with Alexa gives me a hope I haven't felt in a long time.

So, slowly, and with focused deliberation, I've become a man with a plan. After some successful Facebook and Instagram stalking, I learned that Alexa is an avid runner. In measured steps over the last few months, I've chatted her up about the hobby, all

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but convincing her that this is yet another common thread to bind the friendship we share.

Even though I've sewn some fertile seeds with Alexa, I've sensed her tensing and retreating as our attraction has begun showing signs of an intimacy and attachment that hasn't previously been there. I still need to find my way in, which is what brings me here to begin training for the Prospect Park Classic Distance Duathlon – a 10-mile bike ride through the storied Brooklyn park sandwiched between two 5K runs. This will be my lever. And so, I'll train with her (coincidentally, of course), forcing us to spend time together outside of our professional personas so we won't be able to deny the pull between us anymore.

I find a strange sense of comfort in these thoughts as I exit the bathroom and head toward the center of the lobby where the group has begun assembling. No way could she freak out when she sees me, right? But I won't have a chance to debate with myself over this. Before either of us can avoid it, Alexa, who's just finished tying her running shoes, bounds up without looking, sending her careening into my chest. I grab her shoulders to halt her momentum.

“Hey, hang on there, freight train! What's your rush?”

Chapter 2

Alexa

Freight train, indeed. Only I feel like I've been hit by one when my mind deciphers who and what I've just collided into.

Oh. The Hell. No.

In what seems like slo-mo replay, my eyes travel up the well-muscled chest that blocks my path until they meet his gorgeous face. In truth, I didn't need to see the face to know the identity of the solid object in my path. The smell, the voice. The dreamy gray-green eyes that make me think of the Caribbean and see straight through to my soul. It was Mateo Da Rocha in glorious 4k right in front of my face. Quite literally.

I draw in a quick, shallow breath, planting my hands on his forearms while trying to find my voice. "Mateo? What are you doing here?"

Still holding on to my shoulders, he gives a slight squeeze before bending down to kiss my cheeks European style. "I could ask you the same," he teases, deliberately bypassing my question. That doesn't go unnoticed.

"A duathlon seems a bit too badass for you, Lexi," he says with a smile, which for some reason makes me blush and knocks me

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off center. He's not exactly wrong in his assessment because this will be the longest, most intense race I've entered to date. But he doesn't need to know this, so I throw my shoulders back and strut my moxie.

"Then it looks like you don't know what I'm capable of, Da Rocha."

I'm still struggling for my composure, cursing myself as I try to put away the assortment of way-too-awkward feelings that completely arrests my body and my brain. Hastily, I find my smile, put a mask back in place and try not to consider the possibility that steam might be pouring from my ears if my rushing heartbeat is any indicator of such things.

"Seriously, what in the world brings you all the way out here? Aren't you operating a little outside of your area code?"

He laughs, and I'm grateful for the unintended ice breaker I'd thrown out there.

"You really need to lose the idea that my address somehow limits where I can go and what I should do, Alexa. But now let me ask *you* a question. Why do you assume I don't have ties around here?"

"A fair question. I didn't consider that. My bad," I answer with as much indifference as I can muster. Something about him, about our interactions, has been shifting over the past weeks. I can't put my finger on exactly what it is. No, that's a lie. The connection between us has been strong since we met. But I'm too afraid to go there with him and ruin our friendship and maybe risk my heart again. I take a small step back, just enough to pull away from Mateo's lingering grasp on my shoulders. But the space between us remains saturated with our shared tension.

"So, seriously, what brings you out to God's country? No running clubs in DC?" I need to do something to break the bonds of this intensity between us.

He folds his arms across his chest and smiles. "I have some connections nearby."

"Oh, hey, I had no idea," I say. "So, I guess you get out here a fair bit then."

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I've noticed that most of the time, when asked, Mateo prefers to be vague about the details of his life. I've wondered what secrets he may be hiding but chalked it up more to caution than anything else. We aren't too different when it comes to our willingness or not to trust the opposite sex.

"Often enough."

"What's that mean? Care to 'splain?"

"No, love. No, I don't. At least not today," he says with a wink. "What do you say we get settled in here and figure out just what we've gotten ourselves into," he deflects as he nods to the registration desk to his left. "I haven't checked in yet—"

"Mateo, you ass, you can't do that!" I chide him playfully. "You can't just leave me hanging."

"Sure, I can. I just did," he says with panty-dropping smile. "Now come on. Let's go do this thing."

My jaw drops as Mateo turns away from me and heads over for his registration papers. As he takes his place in line, I catch up to him and tug his forearm.

"You're seriously not going to tell me?"

"Of course, I will. Just not now," he teases. "In fact, it'll be my leverage."

"Leverage?" I ask.

"Uh huh. My way of ensuring you'll agree to train with me. Share in this insane experience with me, and I'll tell you...soon."

His smile grows as he reads the obvious confusion on my face. In answer, he points to a sign on the table: DESIGNATE YOUR INTENDED TRAINING PARTNER AT TIME OF SIGN UP. My face drops as I process what this would mean. Running is my sanctuary, a sacred place where my thoughts and I can be alone and in step, whether at peace or in discord. I don't share that with anyone. *But how can I say no to him? How can I deny that this gets my heart beating faster than any foot race?* I swallow to relieve the dryness in my throat as I slowly, reluctantly but with moth-to-a-flame resignation realize this truth. I *can't* say no to him. Not that he's ever asked anything of me. Not really. But now ...?

"Well," I begin carefully, speaking more to myself than to him, "I guess there's a first time for everything."

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I wait a beat while he considers my words. This was a compromise, a convenient compromise. It was *not* about the fact that I can't tell him no, or that I'm scared for us be alone like that.

"So sure, let's partner up. Though full disclosure: I have no idea what that means. Trying to train with someone, I mean."

"Well, then, I guess we're perfectly matched because I don't have a clue either. No expectations. No pressure, right?"

Mateo raises his eyebrows expectantly. I can tell that he can tell that I'm not wholly comfortable with his proposal, and if I'm not mistaken, this seems to please him. Ignoring his satisfaction and resisting the mounting urge to cut and run, I simply nod, square my shoulders, and feign my resolve.

"So, it's settled. *Now* what?"

"No clue," he says, "but we should probably figure it out fast. We're next up."

And with that, he eases me around in front of him, slips his right palm into the small of my back, and guides me up to the desk to sign on for 12 weeks of Lord only knows what. Some 20 minutes later, Mateo and I have joined 16 of our new closest friends as we warm up and listen to our instructor run down the highlights and goals of the training program. Our coach, Linzi, gives off a pixie-like energy and is *way* too perky for my liking. Though she's attractive enough, she's going to be nothing but annoying as hell, all five-feet-two inches of her. Her blonde bob cut, straight, white teeth thanks to thousands of dollars in orthodontia, and cheerleader-like demeanor can't make up for the fact that, for me, she's already an irritant. I work like it's my job to contain the urge to get the hell out of there as pixie-faced Linzi drones on and on about the ultimate challenge that our bodies were about to face.

"I promise you," she begins her wrap-up pep talk, "that if you all push yourselves to the limit and follow this program like your lives depend on it, you will have experienced nothing, and I mean nothing, any more exhilarating than the feeling you get when you finish your first duo."

If her trite take on life's best moments is any indication, Little Miss Linzi is not only shy of a brain cell or two but clearly hasn't

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experienced enough life to make such a call. So, by the time she finally directs the training pairs to run our first 5K, at least five minutes later, aiming for a slow, steady pace, I'm more than ready to beat feet, get out on the road, and pound out a few good miles.

And that's exactly what I do.

Chapter 3

Alexa

I met Mateo nearly a year ago when my dear friend, Sage Vanucci, asked me to be a guest panelist at an annual symposium of working journalists, professors, and affiliated professionals from the advertising and communications communities. Sage is managing editor at the *Washington Post* and founder of “The Death of Journalism and the Rise of Information Domination,” a three-day conference which has become the place to be each spring when purveyors of knowledge and curators of content gather to speak their truths, whether they’re knowledgeable or simply exploiting their popularity as influencers within the digital wasteland that is social media. The whole thing was more about the quotes and quips that get shuttled around through Tweets and shares, cool Insta photos, and TikTok videos. Still, it was one of the few conference destinations remaining where the buzz that charged the room surpassed any build up orchestrated within the cybersphere, which was precisely what Sage envisioned when he conceived the event.

Sage basically pestered his panels into place, calling on friends new and old as well as personalities he’d yet to charm with his wit and charisma. As his long-time friend and confidante, no hadn’t

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been an option for me. Sage and Mateo, however, share more of a passing acquaintance and keep each other at arm's length. At best, they nurture a love-hate relationship and tend to circle each other like vultures vying for a fresh kill.

From the start, Mateo and I shared a palpable attraction and a mutual curiosity about each other that felt as vital as air. But never one to believe in insta-love, soul-deep connections, or any of the ethereal notions associated with matters of the heart, I've made it my business to shut Mateo down. It's not that I'm not interested. I've had more than my fair share of colorful fantasies about the man. And that's why I insist on keeping a bright line between us; he defies logic – and threatens my thread-bare defenses against him – in every way.

Just shy of 25 minutes later, I finish my first shared run. It didn't suck.

Mateo and I had wordlessly kept the same cadence for much of our time out on the trail. Except for the occasional “heads up” and brief “on your right,” we hadn't spoken since we took off along one of the many scenic asphalt trails that spirals throughout and around the picturesque facility. I'd been certain that this desecration of my solitude was of the devil. Then, I got over myself and considered the facts. The training group required that you train in pairs. Had I not paired with Mateo, I'd have been stuck with some uber competitive female I probably couldn't have stood to be around, or worse, a weekend warrior-type with self-worth issues and/or sociopathic tendencies. Or maybe both knowing my luck.

No, the experience was not at all what I'd expected. Not only had I found a surprising peace and satisfaction in our shared silence, but after a little more than three miles together in each other's space, I also somehow feel closer to this man who does strange things to my stomach just by being around. He is six-feet-three inches of beautifully sculpted, solid, gorgeous, ripped, lean muscle. And the way he moves and his long, self-assured, sensual strides, commands respect, attention, and admiration. He'd contained his silky black hair, which falls to his shoulders, in a

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ponytail that was wet at the tips from exertion and based on his half-erect stance and still-rolling sweat, I realize with satisfaction that I've outrun him.

He gropes at the hem of his shorts as I walk toward the imposing willow oak tree that sheltered our essentials while we ran. When I reach the pink canvas duffel bag that my oldest son, Tristan, gave me for my last birthday, I root around for water and a fresh shirt. At first, I hadn't been keen on walking around carrying a bag emblazoned with the words "QUEEN ENERGY" in bright blue letters. It was almost impossible to deny Tristan, though. My oh-so-disaffected teen had been so proud to bless me with cool merch (his words), and I hadn't wanted to hurt the boy's feelings. When I'd found the courage to carry it in public over the last weeks, I found that I'd grown fond of the silly thing and the conversation it inspired. I smile at the thought as I take another long swallow of water.

By now, Mateo is on his way over, sufficiently recovered, it seems, from a few moments ago. I hold out my water bottle as he ducks under a low-hanging branch to join me at the base of the tree. He nods and huffs out a breathy, "thanks," accepting the bottle graciously and chugging the remaining half of its contents. I giggle as I watch him slake what must have been the thirst of a lifetime. Then, I slip around to the other side of the massive, old tree for a bit of cover while I trade my soaked gray racerback for a fitted camouflage printed tee.

"So, tell me, Mateo, you seemed a little off your pace today. No?"

"No, not at all, Lex." *Fucking liar. This chick damn near killed you!*
"But I'm afraid I am quite distracted today."

I reappear from my makeshift dressing room, a frown of confusion across my brow.

"Why distracted? What's up?"

I ball up the sweaty shirt to dab my misty brow as I walk over to rejoin him.

Mateo

What I'm about to tell her probably won't help in my crusade to get this girl to take me seriously. But I can't help myself. Truth is truth. Besides I find it curiously satisfying that I can rattle her. It's like she inspires the 13-year-old boy in me to show his awkward face around the equally awkward, unbearably, intimidatingly cute girl he wants to ask out.

"Your legs."

She stares at me as she processes what I've said. After a few, long moments, she narrows her eyes and tilts her head slowly to the left in question just as I wave her off and flash a quick wink and the smile that I know fries women's brains. I'm not necessarily trying to flirt my way into her heart, and this tack isn't going to be productive in my crusade to change the course of our relationship. It's my natural default. And because I've let the genie out, I might as well see if charm can at least unlock the vault that guards her defenses.

"You heard me, girl," I drawl, stalking over to close the remaining space between us. "I said it's your legs. They're what's distracting me."

I tilt my head to mirror hers and point casually towards the source of my lost focus. Alexa squares her shoulders, standing just a bit taller as she peers up at me through bewildered eyes. I can't tell what she's thinking, but her breathing seems to pick up pace, and her eyes scan mine, searching for the truth. After far too long, she opens her mouth to reply, and I place a finger across her lips.

"Hey, I know that was from left field," I offer, lifting the finger from her lips to brush her cheek with a whisper-soft touch that creates gooseflesh along her arms. *Noted.* "But the way you move when you run, it's amazing." My eyes hold hers captive as we stand but a hair's breadth apart. "You're strong. You're clever. And you're sexy as all hell, Lexi." *Ok, lunatic. So much for taking it slow.*

My words seem to anchor her in place, and I know she must feel the irresistible force drawing us dangerously closer both physically and emotionally. She finally breaks my gaze after a few precious moments, clears her throat, and sadly takes a couple of steps away, leaving me feeling strangely wanting and needful. "Da

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Rocha,” she says, a slight plea in her voice, “you must be delirious. I don’t know what you think you just saw—”

“What I saw is your grace and strength on full display,” I pause, crossing my arms across my chest and letting my eyes wander to her lean, well-muscled thighs. “The way you move in those tall heels you’re always wearing doesn’t even begin to do you justice. The whole time we were out there you and those gorgeous legs kept me off my pace, off my game, nearly drove me out of my mind with distraction.”

She clears her throat once more and dips her head to hide her blush. “Then you need your eyes checked, Da Rocha. And maybe you need a different training partner if you’re so easily, um, *distracted*.”

Again, I close the distance between us and reach for her strong, toned shoulders, giving them a quick, playful squeeze.

“No, I think I’m right where I want to be, thank you. I’ll make do somehow.” I walk past her to the base of the tree, bend down to snatch up my duffle, then return to fill up her personal space once again. “And my eyes are just fine, Alexa.” I give her a small smile and let her consider my words.

She’s confounded and intrigued and probably doesn’t know what to make of the past few moments. But, because I’m coming to know this intoxicating creature quite well, I’ll predict her next move: deflection.

“Glad to hear it,” she says, returning my smile. “But maybe we should have your head examined just to be sure.”

She punches me playfully in the arm, hoping to have dismissed the emotional insanity that my flirtation aroused. It may seem counterintuitive, but this brings me considerable satisfaction in my ability to read her thoughts and instincts.

“In the meantime,” she says, turning to walk away, “we should go back and check in with the pixie stick.”

“Pixie stick?”

“Yeah. Linzi.”

I laugh heartily at Alexa’s nickname for the young girl. “Why, Lex?”

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“Isn’t it obvious?” She asks, a mischievous glint in her eyes as we continue walking back to the rec center. “First off, runner or not, no one’s that bubbly at 7 o’clock in the morning. And truth told, I’ve never been fond of the perky, blonde cheerleader type.”

I nod and shrug my response. “So, it’s woman shit, then.”

She shakes her head, a little miffed at my dismissal. “No, I think it’s human nature. Think about it.” She angles herself to look at me as we near our destination. “Two men size each other up. There’s something between you that puts one or the other off. You immediately decide you don’t like the other guy. It’s just a vibe. But it happens all the time. So much more so for women.”

“You may be right, Lex,” I say, angling in as she had moments before and bending towards her left ear. “But that vibe doesn’t set most men on a course for revenge.”

“Who said anything about revenge?” she retorts with a shrug. “That would take too much time and interest. I just don’t like her. She makes my ass itch.”

I laugh again. “And ass itching is a bad thing I take it?”

“The worst,” she says, giggling, reaching over to tug on my right arm until my ear is inches from her mouth. “Like a plague attacking from the inside out.”

“And God forbid such a plague be allowed to run amok in one’s ass,” I reply, turning as I speak, my face mere inches from hers.

It’s Alexa’s turn to erupt in laughter, but before she gets the chance to reply, Linzi squeals in delight, “Well, now, aren’t you two just the coziest critters on Earth!” Her annoying voice rings out and seems to reverberate, turning previously disinterested heads towards us as we reunite with the group. “Now, really, am I going to have to separate you two? Did you get in your run at all? You both look much too beautiful.”

I take a step forward as if to shield Alexa from Linzi. “I assure you we ran. It wasn’t at the slow pace you suggested.” I look at Alexa briefly before continuing. “So, we had a little more cool-down time perhaps. Hope that’s no issue for you?” I pose my question to the group and find nothing short of keen disinterest.

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“None at all,” she quickly replies, showing off as many of her 32 teeth as she can squeeze into her shit-eating grin. “I encourage each of you to make your training sessions your own! Now, here’s your homework for next week. Every good duathlete needs to challenge their speed threshold to build endurance and, well, to just make the run plain ol’ fun.”

Alexa and I share a telepathy of sorts, and as she glances at me with obvious disdain for our trainer, I clearly sense what she’s feeling for this woman but keep my face unreadable, save the brief wink that most would have missed. We’re distracted from our telepathic tête-à-tête when Linzi turns towards a petite young woman who’s struggling to hide her own disdain, boredom, or maybe both.

“You just hold on there for a few more moments now, sugarplum,” Linzi says, brightening her smile even more as she reaches out to playfully slap at the air between her and the young woman. “I’ll have you on your way to that latte you must have skipped this beautiful mornin’.”

A few pairs of previously disinterested eyebrows raise among the group members at the small rebuke.

“So, as I was saying, you and your partner need to get together this week and plan your tempo runs. Be thoughtful about this before you do it so you can challenge yourselves, and I’ll see all you early birdies back here next Saturday.” She waves both of her hands at the group as she backs away and eventually turns her back in dismissal.

In rapid response, the group disperses with the speed and urgency of animals seeking higher ground in the wake of the next Great Flood. I nudge Alexa and nod my head in the direction of the parking lot. “I’ve got an idea. Come.” I fall into pace just slightly behind her, gently guiding her steps with my right hand, which is comfortably wedged into that space just above her nicely rounded ass. It’s a soft, subtle pressure that seems to shift her senses into hyper drive, which is exactly why I do it. Every muscle in her body seems to strain towards my touch, and though I see her turn slightly to look at me in question, I keep my gaze trained

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straight ahead. Just as she's about to fidget around and away from my touch, I move my hand to her left arm and tug her to a stop.

"Are you in a hurry?"

A question forms on her brow as she slowly shakes her head no.

"Good. Then have breakfast with me."

I see the question in her eyes deepen followed by something that looks a lot like fear. In the time we've been hanging out, having a meal together isn't all that unusual, though it's typically been at least loosely related to our work. Meeting for coffee to make a pros and cons list when she got her job at the PR firm. Inviting her to guest lecture my classes followed by drinks. The calls and texts. Each interaction feels a bit more intimate than the last, intensifying the pull between us, which is fine by me. But her natural inclination is to run from that and from me, and this needs to change. I put these thoughts aside for now and rush to close the deal because I see the rebuff forming on her tongue.

"I don't bite. *Not too hard anyway.* But you should know that by now, Lex."

I can see that my grand un-plan to blur the lines of our relationship is falling the hell to pieces before it even gets going, and I have only myself to blame. I've never really given her more than a glimpse of myself. She has no idea who I am in sum. I remain cloaked, for the most part, operating in panty-drop mode, my smile inviting, albeit rakish, but sincere to the common observer (which Alexa is not). Tempting yet full of warning. So, I can't and shouldn't have expected a reaction other than the one in front of me. I surprise myself with my response to that notion. The instinct to mask my own insecurities and hurts lives deep inside each cell, etched both genetically and behaviorally on my soul. I table these thoughts as I pull at her elbow slightly, giving it a nearly imperceptible squeeze.

"Hey, it's just breakfast. Completely safe." I step away a little, holding up both of my hands as a sign of peace. "The best breakfast you've ever had. Hands down."

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She smiles, but uncharacteristically, I can't tell what's on her mind because she's expertly masked herself, which pisses me off – royally.

“Sounds good. Sign me up.”

Though I'm still feeling the sting of her having shut off her emotions, I return her smile as she turns away and calls over her shoulder as casually as possible, faux smile locked in place, “I'll just get my truck. Lead the way.”

Alexa

“...the best breakfast you've ever had. Hands down.”

I'd searched my brain for a polite rejection but could find none. Instead, it was painfully clear that my faculties no longer had jurisdiction here because I was completely focused on what my heart and body obviously want. *I wonder what it would feel like with your hands down my...*

Certain that my dirty thoughts would grow little feet and dash over into his brain, I'd turned as swiftly as I could to hide my face and head towards my SUV. About 20 minutes later, we arrive at our destination, but I am no less shaky than I'd been when I agreed to go with him. Aptly named, The Breakfast Nook is tucked well out of sight, solidly off a well-traveled thoroughfare that bisects Middleburg, Virginia. The quaint hamlet oozes the image that has come to define Loudoun County. A bedroom community nestled in the ultra 'burbs, quite well west of Washington, DC, the median income is nearly twice that of most other places in the nation. Its resources are abundant, and the communities are precisely engineered, offering all the components required to meet and exceed the ideal of the American Dream.

Mateo slices his motorcycle into one of the shoebox-sized spaces without effort. I, on the other hand, seem to have forgotten how to park as I watch him tear off his helmet, shake out his hair, and dismount the mammoth bike. It really isn't fair that I have so much trouble resisting my connection to him. *We are just friends, and this is just breakfast. We are just friends, and this is just breakfast.* I chant silently to myself as I train my focus on the optics and away from the man. It's a stupid meal, for heaven's sake, I remind

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myself as I maneuver my midnight blue BMW X5 through a ridiculously tight lane that opens (but just slightly) to a sad little parking lot with crackled asphalt backing the restaurant. But that's just it. It really isn't just breakfast. This is a tipping point, following months of interest, curiosity, and fascination, which for me has become a primal desire that I can't indulge. At least, I won't let myself indulge it. My marriage taught me all about the vulnerable underbelly of a relationship. How small wounds left to fester and ooze undetected can eat away at your vital parts until you no longer recognize what's left or what you've become. My divorce brought comfort and restored my life. I know this. And yet, I find myself falling deeper into Mateo. Wanting more than I know how to handle. I swear as my resolve to resist him melts away with whatever is left of the concentration I seem to need to ease my truck between these too-tight lines. Looks like whoever owns this lot has a passion for compact cars only.

I look up from this parking fuckery to see Mateo standing to the side observing my vehicular struggle with poorly masked glee. Yet, I can swear I see arousal radiating from him in pulsing waves, washing over me and frying my brain. Stopping my heart. He crosses his arms against his broad chest and trains his eyes on mine. He knows he's rattling me and seems rather pleased with himself. But I can't care about that just now. I watch as his amusement shifts back to desire, which makes my cheeks grow hot. Damn him!

After what seems like much too long, I kill the engine and reach over to grab my purse from the passenger seat. I ease open the door and squeeze through the narrow passage. As I make my way to him, I'm again undeniably captivated by his presence. To say he's handsome is wholly inadequate. Smoky green-gray eyes, a striking complement to his olive/tan, sun-kissed skin, remind me of jade and feature flecks of amber and sunshine, rendering them focused, penetrating, and hypnotic. But he isn't just unbelievably attractive. He's charismatic. He towers over most people in every way ... and not just because of his height. It's hard to ignore his presence and power, which not only seem to draw people near, but also aid him in reading and deciphering their motivations. I

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should know because the man breaks me down with just a sideways glance. I'll never admit it, but I suspect I don't have to.

Yes, Dr. Mateo Da Rocha, Psy. D., is a delicious, lust-filled fantasy. This friendship I thought we could have is real and rich. But it's become so much more than that as he continues burrowing his way into my life and heart. I shake myself back to reality as I mentally pour cold water onto this treacherous mix of arousal and panic vying for my full attention.

Mateo

Over the next hour and a half, we enjoy our breakfast as I pry my way into this beauty's life. Alexa is light, goodness, and all kinds of sexy. I swear her eyes flash at me with what can only be a described as a promissory note for lose-your-heart sex. And I'm sure she doesn't even know it. Looking into her golden-brown-and-amber eyes is like staring into the sun longer than you should. You know how you see those floaty circles of light afterwards? Just like that, it blinds me when I look at her, and that scares the crap out of me. For real. It's like a flame that promises to scald me to the core, but I can't resist getting closer to it. I need to feel this heat. Once I thought that I could fuck her out of my system, but I can't go there. A random, mindless encounter could never scratch this itch. Instead, I've been breaking her down slowly, gently, bringing her around to realize this until she's forced to submit to the connection we share. My sudden interest in running is probably my best opportunity to bring her around to my way of thinking, so it's time to make a strategic move.

"So," I begin once our table is cleared of dishes and we sit sipping cups of the best coffee in the charted universe, "how should we tackle our training?"

She purses her lips but doesn't respond immediately. I know her well enough at this point that I can almost see her brain at work, but on what, I can't say. Not saying I'm a mind reader. But I assess people with near precision whether they want me to or not. Getting at Alexa has always been a much tougher hack.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Da Rocha?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

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“I don’t know. You didn’t exactly seem to be at home on the trails,” she says. It’s more a challenge than a statement, but I’m not taking that bait. When I don’t respond, she lets some of her frustration show. “Look, stop shitting me. This is the only training club you could find?”

There are lots of ways to play this. Did I figure she’d figure me out? Of course. Did I think she’d call me on it immediately? Hell no. She’s not pissed, but I’ll need to be careful. A little white lie never hurt anyone. There was no bad intent or malice behind my ruse. I could come clean on that, and I probably should. But I also think I need a way to turn this to my advantage. While I figure out what that is, I’ll buy myself some time.

“The only one? No, of course not. But it’s the one with the best view.”

“See, that right there,” she says, pointing a well-manicured finger my way, “you want me to believe—”

“I want you to believe in what you feel.”

This sums up our dilemma in simplest terms. I may flirt with her on purpose, but I do it for a few reasons. I can admit that I enjoy how she reacts when I do, but more important, it keeps her focused on what’s between us, the proverbial elephant in the room that she keeps trying to ignore. She’s been fighting herself to find her reasons to say no because she won’t, can’t, doesn’t want to trust in what we could be. I don’t know which. I don’t even know if that’s the only reason for her resistance. I just need to remove all the whys from her mind and replace them with why not.

“Let’s say hypothetically that I arranged our chance meeting hoping to give us more time together. Your life demands order, so what better way to find more time with you than to schedule it in with something you’d planned on doing since you won’t give us a chance to explore what this is.”

I laugh, and it’s appropriately naked and self-deprecating. Somehow, though, I feel lighter having rid my brain of the words.

“I can think of a lot worse things I could do, so that wouldn’t really be considered shitting you, now would it?”

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She gives me a smile that makes my knees unsteady while she considers me much like a teacher does a clever, mischievous student.

“Well, it doesn’t make you a lying liar that lies. But you obviously have an angle.”

This might be the time to fold. How I show this hand matters, though. I may use fun and flirty as my default setting, but she needs to understand that I’m serious – about her, about us, about learning more about what us means because I can’t quite be sure I know that myself just yet.

“I need to peel back the rest of your layers, Lexi. But I’m willing to earn the right to what I want.”

She studies me with interest and a little apprehension, too. “And that is?”

I shake my head, amused but a bit frustrated as she holds my feet to this fire. “You know what I want, love. You want it, too, because if you didn’t, you’d shut me down completely. But you don’t. So, the question is why you keep resisting. That’s one of the things I want to know.”

I stand from my bench across from her and motion for her to move over so I can slide in beside her. I lean forward to close the space between us even more and reach for her hand, stroking her fingers absently.

“But there are other things, too. So, for the next few weeks, we’ll play a game. Let’s call it ‘The Reason Why Not.’”

“What’s with you and games?”

She laughs but it’s a fair question. It may even be one of the reasons she prefers to believe I’m not all that serious about getting her to change her mind considering that I’ve hit her with a couple of these made-up gems of mine over the months.

“They’re fun and non-threatening,” I answer her finally. “But that’s not the question you need to be asking.”

She groans and gives me a reluctant smile. “I’ll probably regret this, but what should I be asking?”

“You need to know how the game will work, love. So here it is: We’ll play for a few weeks. At the beginning of each week, as we set our training goals for the race, of course, we set a goal to

help fill in one huge blank about each other. When we share what we learned at the end of the week, that moves us one step closer to an actual date. Four weeks. Four new reasons to tell me yes.”

“You’re a smug, SOB, Da Rocha. Even if it’s yes,” she sighs, “the answer still has to be no.”

She smiles and relaxes but just slightly, thinking she’s won.

“Think so?” I counter, all in for the challenge because I’m more certain than ever that what she’s feeling is something very different from what she wants me to believe.

“I’ve told you this.”

There’s something sad and conflicted in her eyes, which is a new feature to this on-repeat conversation. I nod as I try to decide if I like this look on her.

“You have. Still not listening, though.” And now seems like a good time to close this out before she finds her way out. “We usually hang out or chat some each week anyway, so it won’t be like adding something completely new to the schedule. We’ll just have a bit more ground to cover when we’re together. We’ll work out the rest as the weeks go on. Sound like a plan?”

“No,” she answers quickly with a panicked laugh, “I haven’t agreed to play your game, Da Rocha.”

“But you won’t say no.”

“Mateo,” she searches my eyes, her own pleading and desperate, “I’ll never deny that there’s an ease between us, and it’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I’m drawn to you, sure, and that’s all good, but I don’t know if that’s enough to sustain a relationship. What’s more, it frightens the hell out of me.”

I silently urge her to continue because so far, I don’t see the big issue. This is also the most candid she’s been about her feelings. She looks away briefly and closes her eyes like she’s steeling herself to say or do something she really doesn’t want to.

“You could have any woman at all.”

No sooner do the words rush from her lips that she clamps them shut. She didn’t mean to say that last part aloud, but *this*, this simple, vitally important piece of our puzzle, is what has the potential to fuck me up the most unless I can help her navigate

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past my reputation and begin to see me. The me I want to be with her anyway.

“Apparently not,” I counter, “because the one I want can’t seem to trust that what I say to her – to *you* – is how I feel. I don’t meet women who intrigue me the way that you do. Who are half as beautiful as you. Who are as self-assured and as self-possessed as you. All I’m asking,” I grab for her hand and squeeze it because it’s time to close this out, “is that you drop your shields and give me the chance to show you that you can trust me and that what we can be together is worth the risk. So, for the next four weeks, no more hiding. No more deflecting.”

“Mateo, I don’t know if I can—”

“Say yes.”

She stares at me for a moment, the fear evident in her golden-brown eyes. Still, somehow, thankfully, she agrees, and after a mini debate over the tab, I settle, and we take off. Let the games begin.

Alexa

I must have lost my whole mind.

I’m having trouble concentrating on my girl’s night in as I sit on my patio several hours later sipping what is perhaps my leventieth glass of wine with Belinda Hopkins and Phaedra Sheppard. Belinda, or Lindy, has been my bestie almost since the day we arrived at the University of Virginia, where we shared four years of laughs and tears that lay the foundation for our unyielding friendship. Phaedra and I have a more complex relationship. I often rely on her spectacular event management prowess when I have clients who rely on high-end wining and dining to close deals, make launch announcements, or hold other swanky gatherings because Phae is the queen of making things look and feel big, pretty, and impressive. Outside of work, however, she’s more frenemy than friend. While she’s brash and bold in her assessment of everything, I tend to look for the common-ground factors, which is why we barely tolerate each other much of the time. But with Lindy as our common bond, we do our best to shield her from our well-reigned contempt for the other. Phae means well, but she also brings fresh interpretation to what it means to damn

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with faint praise, and it's with that in mind that I arm myself so that I can deal as civilly as I can.

But who am I kidding? Tonight, she could probably insult, curse, and cast elaborate spells on my progeny and me, and I still wouldn't give her the favor of a reply. Since we left breakfast this morning, Mateo has fully occupied the real estate in my mind. He sent his first week's emo challenge, as my brain is calling this insane game, about an hour ago.

*Ms. Winston, Tear Down That Wall.
Imagine you've lost the superpower to deflect all week.
You can't mask what you feel.
Only direct, honest reactions can escape once the Amazonium fortress is
gone.*

Amazonium? The hell? It seems the first round of this imbecilic game will involve three exploration sessions, two impromptu explorations during the week, and one on our scheduled training/hangout day. I'm not sure what to expect but brighten a little to the prospect that he's awaiting my challenge to him.

"Alexa, hello!"

Lindy's repeated taps to my forearm eventually bring me back to the present, and I have no idea what I've missed.

"What do you think? Do you think you can finally get away for that girl's weekend we've been talking about?"

"Sorry, Lin," I offer with a small shrug. "I zoned out. Got some stuff on my mind. What did I miss?"

"I hope it has something to do with that yummy professor who's trying to nail you," Lindy suggests with a broad smile.

"Yummy professor!? What have I missed?" Phaedra demands.

I wave them both off, not wanting to let either of them inside my head right now. Mateo's whittling away at the last of my defenses. We both know it. Though my self-preservation instincts are screaming at me to cut and run, my heart and body have other ideas.

"It's nothing, Phae."

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“It’s not nothing, girl, and you know it,” Lindy rebukes. “Now come on. Give it up. That man’s gotten all in your head and has you up in your feelings when you’re supposed to be present and catching up with your girls.”

I telegraph my displeasure mostly to Lindy, who knows all too well that I’d rather be beaten than give Phaedra any deeper insights into anything I care about. I sigh and decide to give up a sliver of the truth.

“So, there’s this guy, and he’s as off-limits for me as he is gorgeous. Today, he showed up at the runner’s club I joined, and I agreed to train with him for an upcoming race. I’m having some second thoughts about that and was just working through some things in my head.” *Like how the hell I let him talk me into this stupid game with him. But I’ll just keep that to myself.*

“Wait, ho, back up,” Lindy squeals to me. “He joined your running club? Did you two plan that? Did he just show up?”

“He just showed up,” I answer, my voice clipped and strained with the dual frustrations of being forced onto the hot seat and not wanting to offer too much insight when I’ve yet to make sense of this mishmash of feelings on my own. “But really, don’t worry about it. Nothing to see here.”

“Sounds like there’s a full-length feature film in the making if you’re being this cagey about giving up the deets, girl,” Phaedra posits. I give her a half smile because we both know she’s on to something. We also both know I’ll try my best not to cop to it, at least not yet.

“And you did say your Romeo is gorgeous, so what in hell is the problem, Juliet?” Lindy goads.

I narrow my eyes at her, my non-verbal promise to kick her ass once we’re alone.

“I don’t do relationships. You both know this. I may be tempted, but I can’t give in. He’s not easily put off, though, and it’s messing with my head. End of. Now next topic.”

Lindy and Phaedra look at each other, their own unspoken conversation blaring their joint disapproval as loudly as a siren. When Lindy looks to me, I shake my head, my warning to her to stop before she crosses a line from which she may not be able to

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step back. We've known each other too long, been through too much together, for her to goad me into having a conversation I'm not willing or ready to have. Phaedra is guided by a different compass. And when her mouth takes the lead, we usually end up in uncharted waters.

"Alexa, honey," Phaedra begins, her apparent empathy getting my back up, "you can't judge every man you meet by the asswipe that you married. It's not fair to you, and it's definitely not fair to your hottie. There's really only one way to handle this, but you won't know what that is until you do him."

"She's right, you know," Lindy cosigns as she brings her chair closer to mine, her face radiating empathy and compassion. "You're a beautiful, funny, thoughtful woman. It's ok to move on and explore something – *someone* – new. What's the worst that could happen?"

"I get my heart ripped to shreds, that's what!"

"Then this is serious," Phaedra challenges, and I cringe when I spot the gleam in her eyes. "No one said anything about hearts. If you know like I know, you'll let your hormones lead you. Hearts make things messy. So, keep yours out of it, go get with this man and get you some, and everything should be fine."

Here's the thing about advice. It's tough to put stock in it when the offeror carries a dubious worldview – or at least one that you don't or can't subscribe to. Phaedra truly does mean well. She's also in an open marriage and moves through partners like the phases of the moon. As soon as the sex becomes routine, she's off climbing the next guy she fancies. So yeah, she can miss me with her advice.

"Alexa," Lindy interrupts my ruminating, "what are you so afraid of? Dating the man can't hurt you."

My friend knows me so well. I sigh, take a sip of the fruity wine that will linger in the form of a dull headache in the morning, and pour out my fears. Well, some of them at least.

"You know me better than anyone, Lindy. I take lessons from the past seriously. But nothing in my past prepares me for Mateo. The connection is there. The desire is there. Has been since we met. But we're just too different."

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“So far, I haven’t heard a thing that should hold you back. What am I missing?” Phaedra challenges.

I purse my lips, take yet another sip, and open the floodgate to my true fears. “He’s never been married, doesn’t have children, and I’m not his usual type, which seems to be a lot younger and less experienced than I am. So, you do the math. We don’t add up.”

I fear the belly laugh that erupts from Phaedra literally will split her sides, and that puts my shields back up.

“Forget it,” I say, returning my glass to the patio table with more force than necessary. I sit back in my chair and close my eyes as I search for the will not to throw them both out and go lick my wounded, embarrassed pride.

“Phae, pipe down!” Lindy admonishes, her long box braids sliding around her shoulders as she shakes her head vigorously at a still-spasming Phaedra. She returns her eyes to me, the understanding there clear and comforting. “You’re feeling self-conscious, and you have doubts. I think that’s healthy, Alexa. You said he’s 36. You’re 43. That makes both of you grown-ass, consenting adults. You can’t let your fears paralyze you or keep you from being happy. Do you have any reasons to doubt his intentions? I mean, from the little you’ve shared, it seems that despite your best efforts to shut him down, he’s determined to penetrate your sugar walls, babe.”

I side-eye my friend before allowing the smirk on my lips to take full bloom. “I hear you, Lin. It’s just—” I let my words trail off as I decide whether to take this thought from my head and put it out into the universe. “What I feel for him is so much more than I ever felt for Trent the entire time we were married. I’m not saying I’m in love with him. But the way Mateo gets me, get *to* me, the way I understand him, it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced. I don’t know what to do with that. I don’t even know if I want to do anything about it.”

Phaedra, now recovered from her hysteria, leans forward, and grabs my hands. “Look at me, girl. That’s the realest thing I’ve heard you say so far. And if that’s how you feel, who cares how old he is and what his past relationships might have looked like.

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You won't know what you two might be if you don't take the chance. I don't see what you have to lose."

"Have you both forgotten that I have kids who depend on me as their sole anchor?"

"Yes, you do, and yes, they do. But if you're not happy, then they're not either," Lindy answers, her words stealing the fight clean away from me. "You can tell yourself all day long and twice on Sunday that you're holding back because of your kids, but you won't be doing them any favors in the end. Trust me on this."

Though an unplanned pregnancy and a shiftless, deadbeat, eventually drug-addicted baby daddy threatened to derail her Ph.D. studies and her career before it even began, Lindy, with a big assist from yours truly, saw her 17-year-old son, my god son, Luke, through his childhood. He's happy, mature, and well-adjusted, not only because of our love for him, but also because Lindy has always made seeking her happiness a priority, even if it meant getting her feelings hurt or her heart broken. She's modeled what it means to live life on your own terms. And maybe Luke isn't the only one who needs to heed her example.

I eye them both as my mind scrolls through the events of this morning. Hell, if my friends wanted in my business so badly, maybe I should let them dig around so they can help me sort through my confusion.

"Ok, since you two want to play Iyanla Vanzant, then fix my life, heffas. It's not a coincidence that he showed up on the trails this morning."

Phaedra and Lindy look to each other then back to me, their faces prompting me to say more. I sigh and press forward.

"That's just it," I agree. "I know that. And I know what I'd like to think about that. But his say and his do don't always add up for me. We agree more or less that neither of us wants a mindless encounter, yet he's all flirt and little substance most of the time. I don't know him, and that's a problem for me."

"And what does he know about you?" Lindy challenges. "I don't see you exactly putting yourself out there, so have you considered that maybe he feels the same way?"

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And that smarted. “I give as good as I get,” I bluster with a small shrug.

“So, you’ll both remain trapped inside your own twisted, sexually tense version of *Groundhog Day*,” Phaedra quips. “You can’t find out what you two can be together be if neither of you will take a risk. But today, he took a step to call you both on your bullshit, find out what you do, where you’ll be and insert himself into that. It makes me think he’s upped the ante. It’s your move, precious.”

“Maybe,” I admit, though I’m still far from being convinced that it’s time to go all in.

“Definitely,” they say in unison.

“And now that that’s settled,” Phaedra says, “you need to do the work, Alexa. And in the meantime, let’s open another bottle.”

Chapter 4

Monday, August 19

Alexa

I've never met a Monday morning that I liked, so much more so when I consider the tasks that lay before me in the workday ahead. This day would feature end-to-end meetings with a side of posturing and pontification. But before I can get to any of that, attention must be paid to my brood.

"When I grow up, I'm going to have a Thompson's Gazelle as a pet. I'll call him ...Tyrannosaurus Allan."

In customary form, the wide-eyed wanna-be comedian sitting in the back seat lets his quip hang on the air for a moment. Then comes the laughter he was after.

"Boy, where on earth did you come up with that one?"

I manage to croak through fits of chuckles and wonder. As I look in the rear view at my middle kiddo, my eyes dance with pride and appreciation. Trace Winston was blessed with wit and intelligence, and if we could work on his timing, he might be on to something with this latest foray into stand-up comedy. Trouble was, he was more interested in letting his inner comic shine, so school always seemed to be the butt of the joke. Scholarship aside,

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a laugh is exactly what I need this morning. I'd awakened feeling withdrawn and subdued. New day. Same routine.

"Damn." I curse as the school crossing guard stops the line of moms and dads frantically scurrying to drop and dash on their way to work. It seemed the crusty old bitch had it in for me ... well, in my mind anyway. Why didn't she ever stop the guy after me or before me? Why me? Realizing fairly quickly that I was descending into stupidity, I resign myself to waiting as a barrage of children pours into the street and onto the sidewalk to get to school.

"Hey, Mom?" Another, smaller voice interrupts my consideration of current reality. "Mom, Jake wants me to have a sleepover at our house on Friday. What should I tell him?"

"Tell him that the moms will talk and get back to you both. And isn't it time for you to be invited to sleepover at Jake's?" I manage. A sleepover on Friday was the last thing I wanted to deal with. One more screaming kid to add to my own trio. Now, I do love my full house, to be sure. They've been my lifeline over the four years since their father walked out. The initial shock that at first left me lonely and heartbroken has long since subsided, replaced now by a peace like I've never experienced. After another moment, and not wanting to dash my youngest son's hopes, I add, "I really don't have a problem with it, Treat. I'll be sure to call Sohara later today."

"Cool. Thanks, Mom. Don't forget, please."

I sigh and draw in a cleansing breath as I wheel into the kiss and ride outside of the Regal Woods School. I turn around and manage a smile before sending the boy off.

"I won't. Now get out, get to class, and have a great day."

"Yeah, get out, squirt. And don't do anything stupid today, huh?" Trace could never resist flexing his big-brother muscles when it came to Treat, who sticks out his tongue, punches his brother in the gut, and sprints from the vehicle before the older boy can grab his get-back.

I shake my head and hide my smile as my boy leaps from the truck, disappearing into the sea of little bodies rushing inside the exclusive private elementary. I apprise the scene wistfully, almost longing to enjoy the freedom of being 10 again. Even if just for a

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moment. What would it be like to be innocent and endlessly hopeful? Fighting back the need to begin deconstructing my life yet again, I drive Trace and Tristan a few miles up to road to Rock Hills Academy before heading back home to get ready for work. I need to find a way to shake the sense of foreboding that's been niggling at me from the time I crawled out of bed. I just can't seem to get past the feeling that the day ahead will be filled with the unexpected – and that's exactly what I don't want to face today.



I feel my shoulders tense as I ease into the same spot in the same parking lot of the same building that has come to represent all things evil in the world of PR. It's just shy of 9 a.m. as I rush from Storey | Fischer | Stone's underground parking garage into the double-glass doors of the building's lower-level elevator bay. As I stand waiting to ride up to my 11th floor office, the stark alabaster walls and cold, sterile white marble floors seem to reflect and intensify the whizzing and whirring from within the motorized lift, which seems busier this morning than most. Typically, I'm quite good at harnessing the crazy in the air to fuel my need to push through a meeting or a task. But that wasn't happening for me today.

I must find my focus, though. I'm dreading my meeting with Wilson Hedgepeth, who has to be the worst client in the history of clients. He's always so bound and determined to dip, dodge, and down-right lie his way out of the litany of bad acts that he scripts and stars in, despite my good counsel. I know, too, that my boss, Sydell Fischer, will find a way to enforce her will, which is to give the client – especially a client with pockets as deep as Hedge's – whatever he wishes, even if it means compromising the firm's reputation and integrity.

Then, there was Mateo. I'd sent over my challenge to him yesterday morning.

Dr. Da Rocha: A sweet soul will take you farther than a silver tongue.

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Your power to flatter serves you well in most things. But in matters of the heart, maybe not so much.

You'll need to divest yourself of your charms for the next week.

Maybe then, you can allow the man whose eyes say what his words don't to speak his truths.

I feel like a teenager waiting for a call from the boy she likes. He'd acknowledged my challenge with a thumbs up to my text. A stupid thumbs up! But I haven't heard from him since. I know it's only been a day, and because we planned to see each other tomorrow or Wednesday, I should keep my cool and wait – but that's something I've never managed to get right.

Lower level. Going up.

Announcing its arrival at last, the elevator pushes back its doors at a deliberate pace, and I absently enter, resigned in the fact that the bright side in this day ahead will remain hidden to me for now. I might not be able to clean up the trail of dung and disregard that Hedge characteristically leaves in his wake. But if I'm honest, I'll relish the challenge and enjoy the fight along the way. Clinging to that thought, I easily manage a wide, knowing smile as I enter the offices of Storey|Fischer|Stone, storytellers extraordinaire.

Not so long ago, I'd been proud to be named vice president at Storey|Fischer|Stone, one of the largest public affairs firms in metro DC. What I hadn't counted on was the price I'd pay daily to continue to play in this world of bad manners and even worse individuals. Everything about S|F|S is a contradiction. Its promises. The public reputation that once positioned it at the top of the issues-management universe. Even its people. Integrity was nowhere on the corporate menu, and this place would be top pick if Zagat's published a guide to PR agencies for people who are stupid AF.

The stark white-on-white, sparsely appointed foyer is carefully ornamented with artwork that mimics priceless watercolor masterpieces and oozes a quiet calm. Monet and Manet prints, more undeniable evidence of intentional design taken to the extreme, telegraph the definitive designer's signature and span the

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semi-circular wall surrounding the receptionist's welcoming station. Firm founders Reynaldo "Dick" Storey, Davis Fischer, and Samson Stone wanted clients to feel a sense of calm and support within their walls. By keeping the mood serene, they reasoned, they were providing shelter of sorts as they shifted the way the media talked about their wayward habitués.

If these souls were paying attention, though, they'd see the illusion inherent here. The rest of the office space stopped making sense once clients began their walks of shame down the various corridors and into the swank offices and conference rooms. Here, the same white walls became home to bold shapes, weird images, and splashes of color on display, blending Picasso's cubism and a touch of Dada from Dali. Truly, it was a wonder the firm didn't get sued for sexual assault...mind fucking *bad* to be a crime, right?

Right or wrong, the visual dysrhythmia was an appropriate touch for an operation whose stock-in-trade over the past 10 years had become finding a tolerable if not happy ending for some of the most high-powered power players on the planet. Most days, the faces in the lobby, though willing themselves to appear and remain impassive, fell hapless and sallow, as if they'd sprung a slow leak while awaiting their chance to learn how the high priests and priestesses of PR would save them from too much public scrutiny and a raft of negative consequences. I spy two new sad sacks as I pass through the foyer to get to my morning meeting. They're undoubtedly DC's latest perpetrators of fraud, debauchery, and bad judgment. Welcome to the eighth ring, I muse, passing a rapid, weary glance between the worried faces. *Abandon hope all ye who enter here.* I hide my smile as I make my way past reception and into the main conference room to the morning debrief.

"With the arrival of Ms. Winston, we can finally begin."

I dismiss Lachlan Storey as I join the war tribunal precisely at 9 a.m. Most days, I try to be in place at least five minutes before we begin, but the drag I've been feeling all morning leaves me uninspired. Compounding my apathy is the fact that Lachlan is made of 100 percent bullshit. Though he's the firm's executive vice president, his top priority on any given day is to spread his contempt for the work we do like a Tamiflu-resistant strain of the

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flu. Two years ago, his father, Dick Storey, insisted that he step into a leadership role with the firm or leave the business cold, without help, referral, or trust fund. Not knowing or wanting to know how to get by on his own, he took out his frustrations and rechanneled his insecurities by razing the morale and moral fabric of the respected boutique PR firm that his father had painstakingly built with Sam Stone and Davis Fischer over the past 30 years. It was the best way he knew to mask his lack of clear understanding or caring for the place. Most everyone knew this. And no one did a damned thing to stop him.

As has become my practice, I flash him my brightest PR-girl smile, punctuate it with a quick wink, and watch him cringe in response as I enjoy the deep satisfaction that comes with knowing I've raised his ire. Clearly fighting through his vexation, he continues.

“Yes, then, this morning and until further notice, our focus will be on HedgeCo. The strawman in front of you gives you a basic understanding of the big-picture issues. Now, let me cloud that picture all to hell for you.”

HedgeCo's recklessness created one of the biggest environmental disasters outside of a hurricane or super storm along the east coast – maybe ever. Late last year, the company began an exploration for natural gas about 30 miles away from Virginia's shoreline. Though the state's legislature successfully banned oil and gas drilling, exploration in federal waters received a thumbs up during Donald Trump's administration. Staged six feet beyond that line of demarcation, Hedge's operation still sat precariously close to the coast. Even as public concern crescendoed, HedgeCo trudged forward, but instead of hitting pay dirt, the company produced the region's largest ever fish kill, hampering naval operations and further decimating the tourism industry, which was still struggling to recover following the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The company needs to explain this away and now. Sierra Club is sounding the goddam alarms,” Lachlan drones on with high drama. “The Virginia League of Conservation Voters has filed a class-action suit against HedgeCo. But Wilson Hedgepeth insists

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on keeping to business as usual as we get to work to move the bad vibes away and right away. He needs the news channels clear of this snafu in time for earnings week and the start of construction on a series of wind farms that happen to be so close to residential areas in some of the more upscale neighborhoods in Texas that you could take a piss on 'em easy.

“We need to give this construction some special consideration in our planning. These wind farms are big, potentially lucrative deals for a lot of people. I understand it’s a joint venture with some South American energy conglomerate. A few already rich people stand to make even more money, so we can’t have media glomming on to this and kicking Hedge or his deal in the balls. Of course, we want to jump on this crisis now and help our client return to business as usual as quickly as possible. So, Alexa and Trey, you take the lead on how we talk about this little mix of glitches. Make them go away.”

Lachlan mimes a dismissive hand wave to help make his point. I glance across the room and shoot Trey Jackson a knowing look before pushing back from the table. We agree to meet in my office in a half hour, and that’s where I head to consider this very real, very untoward mess ahead of me. Yeah, today was going to suck.

HedgeCo is a long-time S|F|S client. Over the years, the firm has helped the energy conglomerate to navigate a sea of bad karma resulting from bad judgment, hubris, and excess. For the past decade, Wilson Hedgepeth has fought hard to be a recognized innovator in the rush to diversify the world’s energy supply, but he hasn’t yet managed to move the needle quite as far as he’d have liked. His company sank a seemingly endless stream of R&D dollars into experimental programs, and the discoveries brought them no closer to gaining an edge on the market. Its latest pitch to garner a bigger slice of the international energy market starred Gás Natural do Brasil, a stalwart fixture among energy traders, but an obscure player among international power brokers. Because a successful venture could advance both companies’ stock and influence, they’d cobbled together a construct of deep pockets and wide-reaching influencers to rush through planning and

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permitting. The outcome: the first two solar energy farms were completed and opened for business in 18 months. In partnership, the two companies would add to their portfolio by building two more in the US over the next year and a half, thereby creating a new, highly lucrative revenue stream. A lot of people, organizations, and their affiliates stood to make untold profit from a successful deal.

The completed plants never did run trouble free, but the alliance's "people" – the slew of hired guns who stood at the ready to lobby negatives into obscurity – had kept any issues more than quiet.

Wilson Hedgepeth, however, refused to be quiet, instead choosing to tout his success at flouting rules and regulations like it was a form of sport. I knew that there was something obvious and ominous in all of this that I couldn't see, but I'd have to comb my mind for clues later because it was time to deal with this very real and present danger.

"OK, baby girl, who crawled up your ass today? That PR smile can't fool me. Who stole your mojo? You can tell Trey." Trey Jackson stands in the doorway to my office wearing a devious and playful smile that I've grown to love and hate. He's notorious for bringing jokes at the wrong time. He knows this and relishes in his timing.

"Trey, I love you so much, but I can't play with you today. I'm tired in my mind and in my body. All I want to do is get to work so I can make the time pass and get out of here."

"Well, you got whatever's up your ass covered beautifully because you look amazing! Hot even? I wouldn't know since I don't play for your team, but does this mean Sister Alexa is stepping away from the abbey for a bit? Is there something I should know?"

"Trey, it's a dress," I reply, making light of his reaction to the fact that I did, in fact, look stunning today. I'd taken time to diffuse my mix of dark brown and blonde-highlighted natural curls, coils, and waves, taming them until they fell past my shoulders in soft, flowing submission, and the orange-and-tangerine chiffon-over-silk shift dress kissed my knees and fit me perfectly as if

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commanded by my every move. Its long, sheer cap sleeves added flow and sophistication to the ensemble, which I'd paired with classic So Kate Louboutins in nude.

"That ain't no ordinary dress, and you're strutting around in those red bottoms. Guuurrrrrl," he counters, "that dress says, 'I'm the shit and I dare you to deny it,'" he scats, waving his hand in the air with a flourish. "What's got you looking all fashion forward today?"

I smile, flattered by Trey's compliment, and satisfied at the fact that I've disguised my very flustered, flummoxed state today. It's not that I don't dress the part on the regular. But he's not wrong. "Nothing much to know. Look good. Feel good, ya know?"

I can see the intrigue in his eyes as Trey considers my response. He smiles, pushes off the threshold and plops himself in one of the captain's chairs in front of my desk. "You just gonna leave that there? No details?"

"Nothing to tell," I answer, keeping my face impassive.

Before he can protest, my desk phone buzzes, bringing us back to reality. I glance at the caller ID to see that it's my boss, Sydell, who serves as the firm's managing director. I watch it roll to voice mail and suck in resolve. No red light. No message. Not wanting to wreck my mood any further, I decide to put off dealing with whatever's pissed her off this time because it's always something. I look away from the phone and back over towards Trey.

"You realize you've just thrown down the gauntlet, don't cha, baby girl?" He raises a knowing eyebrow in obvious admiration of my intentional slight of the boss lady.

"It seems that way," I reply, a spark of mischief in my voice. "And so be it. I'll deal with Sydell when I'm ready," I retort, waving my hand vaguely in the direction of the phone. "Now, enough chit chat. What have we got?" I sigh, pull back from my chair and saunter towards my window, overlooking the hustle and frenzy on the street below as Trey downloads the situation.

I glance over at the man from time to time as he throws his hands around wildly, recounting his facts to me with trademark flamboyance. "We're looking at pissed off neighbors who gon' cry racism the minute they get wind of who's behind this. The enviros

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are already hard at work planning ways to put Hedge on blast, and my money's on them. And, oh yeah. Let's not forget shareholders worried that the bad pub will anally rape their EPS for the quarter and maybe the fiscal year. The stock's already lost 35% of its value and seems to be in free fall. But that's why you got me, girlie. Lil' Magic to the rescue!"

I feel a bit ill as I consider the gravity of Trey's glib and gloomy portrait of what might as well be the plot for TLC's next hit reality show. Still, I know that Trey is a master at packaging and manipulating data; he's my first and best option for even starting to think about the impending cluster ahead once the crisis is in check.

"OK, then. Not too much to worry about there," I reply with a wink and a broad smile, my tone even and understated. "Just be sure you conjure a unicorn. If I'm right on this, we're likely to need the most magical sources of magic on our side." *An energy concern facing accusations of negligence and seemingly endless vilification. A Texas gazillionaire who couldn't care less. An angry community ready to storm the Bastille.* I shake my head as I listen distractedly to Trey's pointed summary. The next days and weeks would not only be about damage control. Someone would have to answer and pay for this, and because Hedge is the source of this mess, I'm growing more and more dubious over the role PR can realistically play in helping him avoid public censure and disgrace.

"Is that it?" I reply dispassionately, still gazing out the window at nothing in particular.

"That's about the size of it." Trey's statement punctuates the grim rundown.

"Ok. So, let's look at their primary exposures, dig around to see who knows about it, what it means, what they've got to hide, look at the stock trends. Also, get me links to everything that Hedge has Tweeted, posted, liked, or been referenced in over the past 90 days. That ought to give us our Band-aid—"

"And in the meantime, I'll prep for surgery." Trey loved pointing up the drama of his work. "This bastard has fucked all the way up. You know this is a bleeder."

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I nod mechanically, my mind wandering as Trey gathers his notes and heads back to his office. Mere weeks ago, I loved this job. I've always responded well to challenge. But I've never been one to sign on for the ridiculous, and that's precisely what this looks like. So that cinches it. Today would be the longest day. My struggle to stay on point would be useless. This day wasn't even half started, yet it would pit me against ghosts and demons of all types, size, and motive, it seems. Well, bring it on, demons. You'll have to stand in queue to gain my full attention this day.

I stand at my window for I don't know how long watching people pass hurriedly on the sidewalk below, the traffic whizzing by the tallish buildings that define the Tysons Corner landscape, whose carefully constructed roads appear to snake into the clouds. I find none of it beautiful, enticing, or inspiring, which is ironic because years ago, I'd have pegged what I'm doing and where I am now as my dream job. It's not that I hate the work. At least I don't think I do. I think it's the place itself and how it's run that cause me to question whether this is a path I continue to travel. I deal in truth telling, so peddling alternative storylines and near-facts leaves me restless and unsettled. I'm all for shaping the news and messages to our clients' advantage. But I draw the line at delivering deflections and deceptions in order to obscure reality.

"Sorry to interrupt your reverie, your Highness, but some of us hard at work here are being held hostage by your refusal to answer your phone."

Sydell's words drip with bloodsucking contempt as they leap from her mouth and pierce my ears. She stands accusingly in my office doorway, impatiently awaiting my reply.

Reluctantly, I get out of my head and turn from my view of the world beyond these walls. I pad over to my desk, sink into my chair, and dig deep to summon the energy and patience I'd need to deal with this menace. I close my eyes, exhale harshly, and swivel around slowly to face the offending, plastic harpy. It had become an exercise in self-restraint to mask the volcano of emotion that this woman erupted whenever she was near.

"Good morning, Sydell. Is there something that you need from me?"

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I offer myself private praise at the matter-of-fact tone I conjure in response to her latest attempt to pick a fight. Then, because getting under her skin is great fun, I do what I always do when she comes at me with her fangs exposed: I smile the most beautiful smile I can muster.

“Alexa, spare me!”

Sydell laces her voice with the faintest hints of an affected southern drawl, the kind from movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Help*. I’ve learned that her faux drawl grows slightly more exaggerated when she’s pissed, so I’m prepared for her to go full-on southern belle on me.

“You know I was trying to reach you. Why must you always turn my mood south?!”

She surprises me when she stops herself short of inexplicable rage, seemingly recovering right about the time her rant promises to become interesting. Disappointing that. Though I’d never let her know it, I like her rattled and defensive. It says far more about her than it does me. At least I think it does. When she finally speaks again, her tone has softened a bit.

“Had you bothered to pick up your phone, we could have handled this already. But we can do it your way.”

I shrug slightly as a syrupy smile crosses her blood-red lips. I can’t be certain, but I think she believes the wretched gleam she’s manufactured might rival my happy go-fuck-yourself face.

“I simply called to clarify my expectations of you. So, let me be clear: Hedge is anxious to hit the ground running today, and he wants you to personally oversee the PR efforts. You’ll need to clear your schedule to have dinner with him tonight.”

“Sorry, Sydell, that’s not possible. No,” I say, brows raised and convicted in my refusal. Sydell’s slimy leadership is at the heart of Storey|Fischer’s demise. Over the past few years, she’d managed to transform the firm from a powerhouse PR and issues management firm to what basically amounts to a brothel with a direct hotline to *DCist*, *The Hill’s* “In the Know,” and, at times, even *TMZ* and *Page Six*. Instead of fixing the issues that cause public flap in the first place, Sydell favors PR stunts that deflect the matter at hand by distracting the public with nebulosity.

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Problem was, said stunts usually required the mostly female PR team to create the illusion of having a dalliance with the client or being linked to said slimeballs in some suggestive way. Seduced by the promise of a salacious headline, the gossip rags almost always took that bait, allowing the Storey | Fischer team to basically sweep the client's issue under the rug before anyone could remember to pay attention to it again. Though it at times had, indeed, allowed the news cycle to overlook the worst of some of our clients' problems, bad acts almost always had a way of resurfacing, hence the problem with that clown-ass tactic.

When I let Sam Stone convince me to come work here, I was determined to ensure my immunity from demands like this. I've known Sam all my life, so I welcomed the chance to help him revector his company, so long as he could assure me that I'd be protected from being treated like or regarded as a piece of ass.

In many ways, I've been relishing the moment when Sydell discovers that I'm not the latest addition to her little whore house of horrors. It seems that now's that moment of truth, as she's clearly about to try me. She gives an exasperated huff, letting me know the gloves are about to come off. She whips her platinum-streaked, bottle-blonde hair over her left shoulder, purses her wafer-thin, ruby-red stained lips, and narrows her flat, brown, rat-like eyes.

"You *will* cooperate, Alexa. And for once, you will put the needs of our clients and of this firm ahead of *your* ideals and the need to prove me wrong all the time."

"Sydell," I begin as evenly as possible, "I don't usually care whether you're right or wrong. The results you get from your store house of cheap PR stunts usually answer that question in glorious, living color. But that's truly beside the point. I'm no whore. And I won't play that role for any reason, least of all this job." I was proud of the calm tones in my voice because I definitely wasn't feeling this shit.

"Whore?!" Sydell exclaims as though I'd said something so insane and out of the question. "No one's suggesting anything of the sort! We just believe it's good PR—"

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“Well, it’s not. It’s not PR at all,” I interrupt. “It’s lazy, it’s demeaning, and it’s ruined this firm’s reputation.”

“According to whom?”

“Take your pick,” I offer. “WaPo. *PR Week*. You name it. And as managing director, it’s your job to know that!” I shake my head in disgust, needing her to feel my judgment. “Let me make it clear one more time: I’m here to help clients by providing viable PR solutions. This isn’t a dating service, and I’m not an escort. Yes, there will be times when I’ll entertain clients. But I won’t allow anyone to spin that as being on a date unless I want it to be. So, there will be no dinners tonight or any night, with Hedge and me alone.”

“You know,” Sydell begins, rising from the captain’s chair that fronts my desk, “you would do well to learn that there’s a hierarchy here, and last I checked, I was higher on the food chain than you.” She walks around to my side of the desk, sits on the corner, and leans into my personal space. “So that being said, you’ll do what I ask. And you’ll stop pushing back.”

“No. I. Won’t.” I pause, keeping eye contact, my face impassive. “I won’t compromise my self-respect for you or anyone. More important, Sydell, I don’t have to.”

“Oh no?” Sydell raises her brows so high they disappear once again into those bottle-blond bangs. “And why is it you think you get special privileges around here?”

I can’t help the shit-eating grin that spreads across my cheeks because she’s just played right into my hands.

“Because my contract says so.”

Chapter 5

Alexa

When I'd learned that I'd be working for Sydell, I'd been painfully honest with Sam: Without language and protections in my employment agreement that clearly isolate me from being whored out among other things, I wouldn't come on board. He was determined to clean up his firm, and I truly wanted to help in whatever ways I could. But I wouldn't come in playing by Sydell's rules. So, of course, Sam made sure that I got what I'd asked for.

"What in hell are you talking about?"

My phone rings before I can volley an answer her way. *Outside caller: Washington Post.* Great, I think to myself as I settle back at my desk.

"Sydell, we'll need to talk later. I have to grab this. It's probably about Hedge." I cant my head to one side and raise my brows, silently inviting her to leave as I pick up the receiver to answer the call. I hold back my grimace when Ardan Delaney announces himself on the other end. I ask him to hold on a moment while I await Sydell's departure. Our gazes collide, laced with unspoken

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venom, resentment, and something else I can't quite discern until she narrows her eyes and points my way.

"This isn't over. You have some explaining to do."

She pops up from her perch on my desk and storms out of my space. I wait until she's completely gone from view before returning to a call that I know I'm not going to want to field. I hit the speaker phone button and discover that Delaney, who's new to the *Post*, wants an interview to "discuss Wilson Hedgepeth's plans to irreversibly ruin the delicate habitat along the Eastern seaboard." I listen intently as Delaney rattles off the list of infractions that he was prepared to hurl at Hedge for his reaction. This type of phone call was once a game of cat and mouse for me, but now they're simply part of my routine intake process. I'm more than bored with that. I no longer find excitement in the verbal foreplay that these cold calls once spurred. So, I apply my standard replies for handling such matters. Never promise anything. Ask about deadlines. Be politic but dispassionate. Agree to call back before end of business with a status update or a definitive deflection.

As I walk through my well-worn script, my smart phone lights up with a text from Mateo.

"...so, when can I expect to hear back from you, Alexa? You know, we could always talk over lunch, maybe dinner? What'd'ya say?"

Mateo: Hey, Lex. How's your Monday going?

I bite my lip as I read his words, ecstatic to hear from him.

"Alexa, c'mon! There's a ya in there somewhere, am I right?"

Seeing Mateo's words on my screen captured my mind so completely that they'd distracted me from the not-so-subtle hint of suggestion made by the New Jersey accent on my speaker phone.

"Sorry, Ardan," I say brusquely, eyes still fixed on my phone. "You know that's not gonna happen. At least not the way you want it to. But you'll hear back from me within the next day."

Without waiting for his response, I release the call and tap my smart phone to reply.

Me: Hey yourself! It's just another day on the funny farm. How are you?

I watch the text bubbles float, staring at the screen like it's about to reveal the secret to living a long, happy life. I've lost count of how many texts I've begun and deleted over the past two days and feel a little silly about it. I'd probably be embarrassed to know the exact number of times I almost reached out, so I quickly let go of that thought.

Mateo: In between classes. What's going on?

I chuckle at his reply and shake my head a little. One of the things I find absolutely irresistible about this man is the fact that he can read me like a book. I won't let him know that, though. At least not yet. My snark is no deterrent to his keen sense of perception, and I find that sexy as hell.

Me: That would take years to explain. Short version: I'm working with a client I think I might hate, and my boss would like to whore me out to him. Other than that, nothing to see here.

I put down the phone when a ping from my computer announces the arrival of email. The incoming message's subject line immediately captures my attention exactly as its sender intended: Hedge trimmers. Now, I might not have thought much of this had it not originated from Sage Vanucci. From the looks of it, this message is more business than pleasure. But before I can dive into this, my smart phone announces a FaceTime call, and my damned heart jumps as I realize it's Mateo. I haven't had this feeling in so long, and it both scares and excites me. I prop my phone on the kick stand and open the call.

"Hey," I answer, my smile genuine and, I hope, not too cheesy.

His eyes drill into me, his expression serious as he dives in and without greeting.

"What's this about being whored out, love?"

I laugh and wave it off. "Seriously, Da Rocha? I'm being dramatic, but only a little. It's nothing, but thanks for caring."

Shit, I'm cheesy. And fuck me because that came across as a desperate attempt to bait him into saying what I want to hear.

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Despite this oh-shit moment, I manage to keep my face from betraying how awkward I feel – I think.

“Then tell me more. Something has you unsettled.”

He sits back in his office chair as though he has all the time in the world, his eyes imploring me to share my innermost thoughts. And maybe something else, too. So, I lay it out for him, and as I do, I find my inhibitions, concerns, and doubts wash away. It’s a comfort to drop the pretense that typically obscures my words and shields my emotions when I’m with him. Because he’s a trained listener and observer, Mateo has always put me at ease, doing exactly what one might expect. He gives me his full attention, hanging on my words as I allow them to spill from my lips without edit or positioning, and I feel strangely relieved once I get through the whole deflection as good PR explanation. His reply, though, is nothing like I expect.

“Sounds like sexual harassment. Have you talked to your HR department, because I think you should? Your boss wants to force you to have dinner with some sketchy client. That’s not ok!”

He’s mad, feeling a bit protective, I think, and I wasn’t prepared for that. I also don’t expect the tightening that I feel in my core, causing me to squeeze my thighs together to tamp down the desire his response inspires.

“I hadn’t thought to do that, no, but I don’t think it would get me anywhere. I think the fact that my boss and I don’t see eye to eye is the root cause, and she looks for ways to exert her authority over me whenever she can.” I shrug for emphasis because I know that official channels won’t help me navigate Sydell.

“Maybe that’s the problem. If you look for the worst to happen every time the two of you deal, you’ll probably find it.”

“Thank you, Dr. Da Rocha, but you may want to save your psychoanalysis until I put this into better context for you.”

I offer this lighthearted reply, but my frown and slight shoulder shrug betray my attempt at levity.

“I hear what you’re saying,” I continue after a moment. “I also know Sydell. I know that she hates the fact that I don’t conform to her idea of how I should operate. Trust me. It’s layers deep, and it’s nasty.”

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“It may be nasty,” Mateo responds, “but I’ll bet it’s not that deep.”

“Then what do you think it is?”

He smiles, leans forward, and chuckles a little, his eyes full of amusement.

“A woman who is beautiful in every way is irresistible to all – and the worst kind of threat to a woman who wishes to be.”

I raise my eyebrows, smiling and shaking my head slowly as my heated cheeks betray the calm, in-control demeanor I so desperately try to maintain with him. I roll my eyes playfully before looking away from the laser-like green-gray gaze boring into me, keeping all rational thought at bay. I pause to consider his words, my own seemingly caught in my throat.

“Not sure I can speak to that. But you turn a nice phrase. Then again, you know that.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “I’m not feeding you lines, love. I’m not allowed to, if memory serves.” He gives me a wink and tilts his head a bit. “I’m just saying that we tend to make things more complex than they are. Boil down her motivations. It sounds like you’ll find jealousy at the heart of it. Give it some thought, then put it away. I’ll bet it’ll change the way you approach your encounters with her.”

I purse my lips as I try but fail to contain my smile. “Can I just tell you that hanging out with a psychologist sort of messes me up sometimes?”

“Is that why you do it?”

“Do what?”

He sits up a bit taller at his desk, where he plants his elbows and entwines his fingers, bringing his two pointers to form a steeple.

“Shut down just as I start to unravel you?”

Shit. I don’t know how to answer that. I mean, I do, but I don’t want to.

“And before you answer that, Lex,” he adds, correctly assessing my planned capitulation, “remember: No powers allowed, warrior princess.”

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He gives me a small smile, which may have been innocent enough on its own, but the wicked glint of mischief in his eyes betrays his truth. As I suspected – check that – as I knew all along, this isn't really a game. It's more like a change in our rules of engagement, designed to rip me and my inaccessible heart from our protective cocoon. Slowly, gently, I've agreed to let him deconstruct the world I rescued and revived after my divorce and rebuild some version that is sure to expose me to all the things I've carefully resisted. So far, though, this seems to be a one-way street; as he deconstructs me, he remains the enigma. I turn my eyes down from the screen in the brief moments before giving him what he wants, no clue of where this will take me, take us. And still, I dive in.

“In part, yes.” I draw myself up on my desk, prop my elbows on the surface and lace my fingers together to cradle my chin. “But it's more than that. You seem to be able to see inside my words. When we talk, the words we speak aren't the only ones we share. Our conversations can have tons of subtexts, and it's like a multidimensional assault on my senses. I back away from that to protect myself from what it all makes me feel. To reset.”

I sit there for a moment, not exactly feeling like I've copped to my sins but somewhat cleansed, lightened. I slump back in my chair and shrug a bit, needing to let myself live in the nakedness of my admission. Needing a bit of distance, even if only figuratively, from Mateo.

He's watching me this entire time, clearly, deeply invested in my thoughts. “So, it's about protection. I get that,” he says, then huffs out a rough breath and looks away from the screen momentarily. When he looks up again, what I see in his eyes seems urgent, not threatening, but the shift is clear and brooding and pulls me in, implores me to hear him and to feel his sincerity.

“But maybe try to keep this in mind. If I didn't really want to know what's in your heart as well as what's in your head, I wouldn't ask.” He studies me some more as he chooses his words. “I want to know everything about you. I want you to be comfortable that I won't weaponize anything you share with me. Let's work on that.”

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I stare into the screen, dazed, and strangely impressed by his perfect command of our moment of awkward. But I can't let that steer me away from what's niggling at my brain.

"Does that work both ways?"

He frowns slightly and tilts his head. "Of course, love. I don't have anything to hide from you."

I highly doubt that but smile anyway and am grateful when he pivots onto safer conversational ground.

"Now aside from today's events, did you have a good weekend?"

"Yeah. I got together with friends Saturday night for wine and girl talk. Other than that, things were pretty quiet. You?"

"Quiet as well."

"Oh? No parties or co-eds to conquer?"

I'm not sure why I felt the need to poke this bear, but I did, and I have, so I deserve whatever answer may come my way.

His response isn't exactly what I expect, though I'm not quite sure how I thought he'd react. He searches my eyes in that way of his, as if he's excavating the depths of my mind to dig around for my innermost thoughts and motivations. In these moments, I feel like a salt-coated slug forced to shed my skin. It makes me want to squirm in my seat and again focuses my attention on my lady parts, which apparently enjoy this sort of silent interplay with him.

Though I have no idea if he finds what he's looking for, he gives a small smile and shakes his head.

"No co-eds for me. Not interested. Besides, keeping up with you on that trail on Saturday ruined me for the rest of the weekend."

"Ha! I seriously doubt that."

"Well don't. I'm going to have to take some vitamins to keep up with you, girl. And that's another reason for my call. Are we getting together tomorrow or Wednesday for our next training session?"

"From what I heard this morning, it doesn't sound like the weather's going to hold up on either day."

"No, it doesn't, so why don't we use my gym? Would that work for you? I don't know how you feel about treadmills..."

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“They’re of the devil,” I quip, “but can be a necessary evil. So, I guess that would be ok. Um, sure, I guess tomorrow is as good a day as any so long as it’s around 6 if that works for you.”

“I’m clear any time after 2:15. So, good. I’ll text you the address. In the meantime, how are you going to get out of going to dinner with your skeezy client?”

“Skeezy?!” I throw my head back and laugh as my desk phone buzzes with an incoming call from Giovanna Brancose, our office receptionist. I press ignore for the moment. I’m not expecting any clients this morning, and anyone in the office who’s looking for me will simply have to wait.

Thanks for the laugh, but I’m not worried. When I agreed to come on board, I anticipated that this might be an issue and had a clause included that protects me from having to get caught up in trash.”

He frowns. “If that’s the case, then why is your boss insisting?”

“Because she doesn’t know about it. I don’t know if you remember, but one of the firm’s founders, Sam Stone, is a long-time family friend. He took care of it for me.”

“Well played, Lexi,” he praises, and the relief on his face does something to my chest. “You’ll have to let me know how it goes once she finds out.”

“Count on it. But I should really go. Duty calls.”

“As it should. Talk later, love.” And he kills the call.

Before I can dive into the day’s work, my desk phone buzzes yet again.

“Alexa?”

Giovanna’s clear and urgent voice rings through my office.

“Hey, Gigi. What’s up?”

“Sydell asked me to have you come to her office immediately.” Her voice trails off after having delivered what I’m sure she knows is going to be unwelcomed news.

“Thanks. Let her know I’ll be there in a moment.”

I release the intercom and take a second to come back to my work persona as I consider how to play this. If today is any indication, the shine of this job is officially gone. I don’t necessarily require shiny objects, but I do need to know that my

expectations of what this job is and what it isn't align with the reality of what I've stepped into. And it would seem I was about to find out.

Sydell and I began our work relationship well enough, but our accord quickly unraveled. It may have been our decidedly different approaches to running a public relations business. Or, it may have been the fact that Sydell didn't know jack shit about being a solid, crafty, proactive communicator. Because she's an attorney by training, our big-picture thinking rarely aligns. I've found that the art and sometimes intuitive nature of solving image issues is diametrically opposed to the rigidity and arrogance of the legal mind. The two are star-crossed lovers, oil and water, arsenic and old lace, making collaboration a careful tightrope walk. Whether or not the tandem arrived on the other side unscathed often had as much, if not more, to do with strength of will and personality as with the matter at hand.

I suspected, too, that she was anxious to rewrite her professional legacy as she continued to outrun her past work as a senior associate at Nebbish & Cannady, one of the world's largest law firms. She'd lost her license to practice for two years after violating ethics rules governing professional conduct. I've never bothered myself with details, but I do know that she had to answer serious concerns over the way she represented clients and agreed to settlements without their consent. Instead of toughing it out and returning to practice, she leaned on her uncle, Davis Fischer, to throw her a lifeline, effectively side-stepping the story of her career. That's when he hired her as Storey|Fischer|Stone's vice president of business development.

Sydell worshipped her position and the power (real or perceived) that it afforded, ushering the firm into the era of scorched-Earth leadership. Word is, she would never have made partner if she'd stayed at Nebbish or perhaps at any of the global legal powerhouses. Joining S|F|S injected new life into her career mobility in more ways than one. Too bad she simply wasn't cut out for the image-making business. Always on the hunt for the flaw in any proposed solution, she brought an attitude and disposition that didn't line up all that well with the firm's culture

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or with PR in general. She'd discovered a kindred spirit in Lachlan Storey, and the two were now simpatico, united in their quest to crush what was left of the firm's legacy and standing in the PR community.

As a result, I found myself in verbal sparring matches with the woman much of the time, almost always using her words against her. In so doing, I'd unwittingly swung the likeability meter my way, and that was one thing Sydell could never manage to bend to her will. At her very core, she needed to be liked, and the fact that everybody hated her was an open secret. Still, she chose to walk in supposed ignorance of the obvious, opting instead to continue trying to charm her way into the hearts and minds of her colleagues.

Sydell, who, according to office legend is good on her back, didn't help her case when she began an affair with Dick Storey shortly after joining the firm. Dick's favorite pastime was horizontal gymnastics, so when it didn't take long for the two to sniff each other out, no one apparently was all that surprised. What does surprise me, though, is the fact that she can maintain such a strong relationship with Lachlan while banging his father, which, to me, speaks volumes on both their characters.

In short order, Sydell had leveraged her position as side chick to influence Dick's decisions. He had an eye on retirement and one foot out the door and therefore gave her the freedom to decide as she liked. That supercharged her degree of influence and rebranded S|F|S from the PR powerhouse it had been to a pop-culture inspired, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*-style abomination.

When I round the corner to Sydell's office, her secretary waves me inside. The side-eye she shoots me but thinks I don't see is telling, so I prepare for battle as I pull open the doors to her office.

I immediately feel hostility radiating from the room as my eyes pan the scene to discover Sydell is now joined by Sam Stone. While Sam's face is unreadable, Sydell regards me as though I'm chattel, little more than a lamb to the slaughter.

"Sit," Sydell commands, pointing to a chair that's been strategically placed by itself on one side of the round conference table in her office. She and Sam are seated on the other side of the

table, in what I imagine is her effort to draw clear lines between what she regards as their positions relative to mine.

I shake my head as I approach the table. “No, I think I’ll stand.”

Sydell shakes her head and does some dramatic looking maneuver with her eyes that’s way north of creepy. Before she can speak, though, Sam brings the evolving mess back into alignment, silently quieting her with a look.

“Have a seat, Alexa. Please.”

I eye him dubiously as I make a graceful decent into the proffered chair but decide to short-circuit any planned niceties.

“I’m guessing this is about the contract clause that Sydell and I were discussing earlier. How can I help you?”

Sydell sits up stock straight, her eyes flashing daggers my way. “You can help me my getting off your high horse, Alexa! As an employee of this firm, you’re expected to provide client service in any way the client sees fit. If you can’t do that, you have no place here.”

I hold her stare, realizing that if faced with having to walk out, I’m more than good with that. But I don’t want to play that trump just yet. I simply nod and decide to watch the board a bit longer.

“Hold on a moment, Sydell,” Sam says, playing nicely into my wait-and-see strategy. “I brought Alexa here to help this firm return to what it does best. We shape the public’s perception of some of the most powerful people and platforms in the country. She understands that and is one of the best assets we’ve brought into this firm since I helped launch it. In order to snag her, we vigorously debated the terms of her employment, not the least of which included an exemption from having to comply with requests such as the one you’re making of her today. I want and need her solidly focused on fixing this mess of an image we’ve conjured for ourselves.”

“What image mess? And why did I not know about this supposed clause, Samson?” Sydell spits the words like they taste nasty in her mouth.

Sam’s lips curve into the smallest of smiles. “Because you’re not an owner of the firm, Sydell. Neither are you a director. As

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such, there was no compelling reason to pass her terms of employment by you. And this is a business – not a dating service.”

She immediately blanches, and I have to work to keep myself from returning Sam’s smile. Because saving face is her middle name, she recovers just as quickly and angles her chair to face Sam. “But as a member of the executive committee—”

“You have no express right to see such agreements, Sydell. Your role begins and ends with evaluation of the candidate and their credentials.”

“You never did want me in this role!” she accuses, her eyes narrowed and shoulders tight, channeling her spoiled inner princess. “I’ve done nothing but try to bring this firm into the new millennium, and at every turn, you’ve been too bull-headed to see the value that I alone can bring.”

Apart from the slight twitch I detect in the right corner of his mouth, Sam gives nothing away. He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t nod. He simply sits in silence, his face unreadable to most. However, knowing him as I have all these years, I see clearly that he’s amused by her comments, and he’s going to let her ramble on for a while yet.

“See, Dick warned me that you weren’t a fan of mine, but I like to bring positivity to all that I endeavor to achieve,” she drones on, her voice dripping honey, her affect sickeningly melodramatic. “No matter what I do, you find fault, so I think it’s time for you to man-up and simply admit that it’s personal.”

Don’t get me wrong. I love a good telenovela, but this is not that. Sydell has got to know that she wouldn’t have this role if it wasn’t for the fact that Dick Storey put her in play when he retired. From what I’ve learned since taking this position, the woman requires an endless stream of kudos and absolute fealty from the world around her to feel secure. She can demand respect all she wants, but that’s hard to come by naturally when the fact that you’re the founder’s side piece is an open secret. It’s an even tougher sell when you clearly don’t have the knowledge or chops to get the job done.

Sam allows the smirk on his lips to form fully now as he leans back in his chair and away from her. He stretches his long legs in

front of him, places his elbows on the arm rests, crosses his hands and steepled his index fingers. I've always loved seeing the man prepare for a verbal dress down. Let's watch.

"First, Sydell, you must understand that while this *is* business, as a founding partner of this firm, everything that we do I take personally. Everything. So, when your actions threaten to morph my life's work into some bullshit reality show, you might well expect me to take countermeasures."

Sam pulls up to his full stature, leaning forward just slightly now that he's laid the groundwork for what's to come. Even seated, his lean but powerful, six-foot-plus frame cuts an imposing figure.

"The world at large may be happy to reduce itself to sound bites, what's trending, and mindless memes, but I won't let you cheapen this firm's legacy. We are so much more than a *Real Housewives* headline and silly publicity stunts. That's why I expect more of you and of everyone whose paycheck I guarantee from week to week.

"So no, I don't like the direction you've tried to imprint on this firm because it's short-sighted, lazy, and plays to the lowest common denominator. Despite what you think you know, your actions prove time and again that you are a far better business manager than issues manager. You lack empathy and know even less about PR, so let me give you a tip. Our clients don't pay us to whitewash their problems with tabloid headlines. They pay us a premium to fix their fuck-ups and clean their image, so the next time you try and hold one of our employees hostage to the whims of some horny bastard because you think that's the fastest way to make his problems disappear, you'd do well to remember this firm's mission and your all-too-obvious limitations in helping us achieve it."

By the time Sam is finished, Sydell's face has transformed from pasty white to ashen gray, and her flat, dark brown eyes darken further with fury as they settle on me. She lifts a finger towards me then directs her reply to Sam.

"It's inappropriate for you to be leveling such accusations my way in front of *her*. You're discussing policy decisions, and that's a

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matter for the owners and the board. I may not have an ownership stake – yet—”

“And I’m here to see that you never do, Sydell,” Sam interjects, his voice eerily calm yet still clearly projecting his frustration with the woman sitting next to him. “What I choose to discuss and with whom is my business.”

“But whatever will the board say when they realize that you’ve cut some backroom deal with her but not for any others? It’d be a shame if they found out that the staff knew about this before they did.”

The challenge in her voice dares Sam to dispute her, but Sam never bowed to such threats. He rises from the table, and Sydell follows suit. I have to hand it to the woman; she’s willing to go toe to toe with any man who challenges her. But the tools of men often translate quite differently when wielded by women. In this case, Sydell’s attempt to short circuit Sam’s power play is as ridiculous as a pug working her ultra-stubby legs desperately fast to keep pace with a Great Dane.

“Stand down, Sydell. You have no idea what you’re talking about. And you have no business threatening me because in no scenario will that ever work well for you. But since you want to issue poorly veiled challenges, let me be clear: the board knows and approves of the employment contract that we inked with Alexa.”

Sydell, now apparently in a state of aphasia, is very evidently seething from the sting of Sam’s words. Unfazed, he reaches down to grab his phone, places it in his left breast pocket, and turns to leave Sydell’s office. He looks to me with a quick, crisp nod of his head. “A moment of your time, please, Alexa?” He then turns his attention back to Sydell and says, “We’re done here, I believe,” and the tight, closed lip smile he offers Sydell is money. He’s out the door before she can pick up her chin and offer a reply. I follow suit, wish Sydell a good rest of her day, and follow him out of the office.

Chapter 6

Alexa

It was more than a bit curious for Samson Stone to involve himself with office matters these days, so I wasn't sure what to expect when he asked to speak with me. I've known the man all my life, and his movements and motivations are now as clear to me as the facets of a brilliant-cut diamond.

While earning his graduate degree in Fine Arts, he'd been a teaching assistant under Franklin Winston, my grandfather, until he left George Washington University to launch Storey|Fischer|Stone. Because Professor Frank Winston, the self-proclaimed master of literary intrigue and best-selling writer of predictable mystery novels, was a demanding asshole, Sam spent countless hours at our home on nights and weekends doing the good professor's bidding. Grading papers. Creating lesson plans. Having his ideas ripped to pieces and then completely stolen and bastardized by the temperamental James Patterson wanna-be. Even though his work with Papa Frank (as he insisted we all call him) commanded 180 percent of his attention, Sam never turned me away when I came around to distract him from whatever fuckery had been tossed his way. I think he felt sorry for me because Frank made it clear that I wasn't among his priorities, and

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Mama Esperanza was often sick and unable to spend much time with me.

Through adult eyes, I can almost sympathize with Frank Winston. He was a trailblazer, the first African American writer in residence at the university, and he took the honor seriously. Because he grew to value the status it brought him more than the hard work he'd put in to gain notice, he spent more time enjoying the boost to his fame and exploiting his heightened social status than he did writing or even lecturing after a time. On some level, I think he must have feared having his success legitimized. It made it too real. Shone too much light on cracks best left obscured. He allowed the weight of success to become an untenable pressure that he carried without grace or caution, and so, I guess it was easier to be an asshole than to face and defeat the self-worth demon.

And so it was that Sam and I became fast friends. He was my rock, my sounding board, the architect of my confidence. He might also have been the one I called on to help me out of more than one teenage jam during the high school years, effectively conspiring with me to conceal a drunken night out with friends and the rare curfew infraction here and there. So yeah, I know the man better than most.

Though he cast an impressive and intimidating shadow, Sam's temperament was more that of a kindly grandfather (albeit fairly young at 65 and more than holding his own physically) than the powerful magnate that he was. Slightly graying temples accenting his full head of sandy-brown hair and faint crow's feet around his golden-brown eyes with bursts of amber were the only tells of his age. He was still in peak physical condition, and he used his assets and attributes to his advantage.

Before Sydell was appointed managing director, Sam's interests had drifted away from handling client cases. When he wasn't off writing books or delivering keynote addresses at some dull (insert name of industry here) conference, he was creating sculptures from iron scraps out of his in-home studio (a hobby that had become quite a lucrative sideline). He'd left the day-to-day PR business shortly after Dick Storey brought in Lachlan, and soon

thereafter, Sydell, to run the firm's operations. Now, Dick was off sailing and cavorting God knows where while his asshat son destroyed the spirit and legacy of the business that they'd spent a lifetime growing and nurturing together. In the absence of his partners and in light of the firm's reputational downturn, Sam had made the difficult decision to return to the daily grind and preserve his legacy.

His long strides challenge my shorter gait to keep pace, yet I remain hot on his heels when he glances over his shoulder and says, "Your office is better." I nod and follow him around the corner and into my space. Once inside, he waits for me to pad in behind him, closes the door and motions to the small conference area in the left corner. I sit and wait for him to do the same.

"Well, wasn't that fun?"

Though his lips give away nothing, the light in his eyes dances with glints of humor, displaying the all-too-familiar smize that most people miss. I display my answering smile full-on and shake my head.

"Though I do enjoy a good parlor game, be sure to miss me with the next round of Words with Sydell. Wanna tell me what's really going on here?" I wasn't in the mood to mince words or spend much more time on personality clashes.

"It's you. You're behind the scrutiny. It's a girl thing." He tsks and offers a smirk and a slight shrug. "I'd have thought you'd figured that by now. Are you slipping, Lexi?"

I narrow my eyes, not buying the bullshit. "Not at all, but I need to you make it plain for me, Sam. Sydell has challenged me at every turn since I started here. On small things. On big things. You name it. So, don't try to reduce this to the level of a girl fight. We've never been friendly, but in the last week or so, she's gone next-level crazy on me. What am I missing?"

He tilts his head to the side and considers me for a beat before responding.

"She's insecure about her job."

"Does she have reason to feel that way?"

"She does. She knows I want her out as managing director."

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I sit back in my chair and try to read the meaning beneath his words. But I'm not there yet.

"I'm listening."

"I want you in her place. She knows it, so I suspect that's why she's coming for you."

"How do you know that's something I'd agree to?" I didn't see this coming, and I'm not sure I want any part of it. My life doesn't need any new moving parts.

"Because you won't say no."

"Sam," I begin, cautiously. "I'm not sure I want that. Not now."

"All I'm asking is that you give some thought to the future, my dear," he pushes on, disregarding my apprehension. "Nothing will happen at once, but I'd planned to nominate you to join the executive committee at the end of this month. Given this recent clash with Sydell, I'll be moving that plan up to our next meeting, which is later this week."

I narrow my eyes and shake my head. "What does that mean exactly?"

"For now, just stay on your toes. And think about taking a lead role in shaping this firm's future. I'll keep you posted."

He claps his hands together and gives me a quick nod of the head. A quick check of the clock alerts me that I need to put all else aside and prepare for what's likely to be a meeting fraught with more personalities than a Miss Texas pageant.

Chapter 7

Alexa

When things finally die down, I take a few moments to comb through the mountain of messages crowding in my inbox. I'd completely forgotten about the "Hedge trimmers" message from my news hound of a friend, so I start there. What I find inside knocks me sideways.

Sage and I met in journalism school at Columbia University. I'd been so excited, albeit lost and alone, and he'd been one of the first people who'd stopped along the bustling city campus long enough to even care to say hello. A Venetian by birth, he'd spent the school years following his parents' divorce with his Greek mother, Aida Stannos, in Florence, Italy, and his springs and summers with his New York-based financier father, Carlos Vanucci. As a part-time native New Yorker, Sage had volunteered to show me the high points and hot spots around Manhattan, including, at a point, his bed. Thing was, though we'd hit it off from the first, realizing quickly that we shared many of the same interests, sexual chemistry was not one of them. I'd halted our intimacy on the down stroke – literally – but Sage never held it against me. In fact, it was the thing that had solidified our friendship.

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After graduation, Sage quickly became known for his hard-hitting investigative reporting while I began a career as an associate producer for the erstwhile *Gretchen McMillian Show* on MSNBC. I liked my job, but Sage seemed to have found the other part of himself once he launched his career. A consummate news hound with charm and classic, rugged good looks, Sage gained purchase with just about any audience in any situation at any time. These tools served him spectacularly, enabling him to source and file bombshell exposés unmasking some of the most elite, most well-known Washington power players. He was able to uncover said scandals thanks to his ability to get people talking. He had an uncanny knack for putting people at ease, and he used this to his advantage to build a portfolio and reputation that led him straight to the managing editor's seat at the *Post* in what seemed like record time.

Our friendship has only grown stronger over the years, despite the demands of our respective professional pursuits and the fact that my ex-husband hated him. I'd refused to let Trent force my hand in the matter, and though I respected his feelings, limiting interactions between the two, I never abandoned my friendship with Sage. Following my divorce, I blocked out the world while I licked my wounds and sealed off all access to my heart. During this time, Sage voluntarily shouldered many of the dad duties that the boys' father had never embraced while we were married and fully abandoned once he'd left. Professional Day at school. The occasional school play when he wasn't busy with work. Weekend sporting trips and events.

These days, reporting was a hobby for him, but if the information in this email is to be believed, he's still well sourced and tenacious. What I read sends chills down my spine, and though I want to delete every foul sentence on my screen, I'm riveted by the depth of the well-supported, deeply and credibly sourced accusations before me.

I don't want to see any more of this, but I need to because if what I'm seeing is to be believed, I want no part in representing Wilson Hedgepeth. I pick up the phone, scroll to my contacts and ring Sage's office line. His secretary picks up on the third ring.

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“Sage Vanucci’s office, Amelia speaking”

“Hey, lady, it’s Alexa Winston. Is he available?”

“Oh, hi, Alexa. It’s been a while! And yes, he’s been expecting your call, so I’ll put you through.”

Of course, he was expecting my call. You don’t drop bombshells like this and expect me to stay silent. He’s on the line moments later.

“Took you long enough,” he answers without greeting, as is often his way.

“Hello to you, too, Vanucci. I see you’ve been busy.”

“Always. What took you so long to get back to me?”

“I have shit going on, man, so talk to me. Is all this stuff about Hedge a joke?”

“As if. I never joke about news. And this is just surface scraps. There’s more where that came from.”

“Ok, back up for a moment. This is legit?”

He sighs and clucks his tongue. “You wound me, *tesoruccio*.”

I laugh at his righteous indignation as well as at his ridiculous nickname for me, a tag I haven’t been able to shake even after all these years. Depending on whom you ask, it means darling, sweetie, or cutie, maybe even duckie in some contexts, none of which is a moniker I’d have penned for myself, but hey, it seems to make him happy to know that we have this weird thing between us that no one else shares or remotely even understands. So, it’s stuck.

“Aw, *pobrecito*,” I tease. Poor baby. “I’ll apologize later. But right now, I need you to say more.”

For the next few minutes, Sage runs down a list of mind-blowing allegations about Hedge and his dark proclivities that have been kept out of the news and away from the light of day thanks to the man’s cavernous pockets.

“Then how’d you gather your sourcing?” I ask.

“Alexa, you wound me. I wasn’t looking for it, but you know I maintain a pipeline. Several pipelines, in fact. I have to in this role, not only to keep my detractors at bay, but also to keep everyone here on their toes. There will be no Janet Cookes or Jason Blairs on my watch,” he declares emphatically, referring to once-

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prominent reporters called out for fabrication and plagiarism in their reporting. Janet Cooke, who wrote for the *Post* in the 1980s, won a Pulitzer Prize for a piece that later was determined to have been untrue, while Jason Blair, formerly of *The New York Times*, both plagiarized and lied in his writing and reporting, leading to his ultimate resignation from *The Gray Lady* in the early 2000s. The racial biases and barriers that the reporters experienced notwithstanding, Sage believed in the power of the Fourth Estate as though it were a Holy Sacrament and refused to suffer the presence of bad actors who lacked his reverence. I've always admired his journalistic integrity, now mostly a dusty relic in an age where the profession's top goal is no longer to inform but first to entertain, advocate, and attract advertising revenues.

"Sounds like more than a full-time job, Vanucci, but I suspect it also has something to do with the fact that you love sinking your teeth into a good lead, no?"

He sighs, "Guilty. But you're getting away from what's important, Winston. Your firm reps HedgeCo, so I thought you might want to know what's in the wind about your client. I don't think it's going to print immediately, and from what I can tell, no one in the broadcast media has caught on yet. For now, that has everything to do with the catch-and-kill game he's got going on. I've confirmed that he's got the state press corps in Texas on lock, but the fact that I'm aware might mean something's about to blow up."

"Are *you* planning to go to press?"

"On the record, I can't tell you that."

"And off the record?"

"Shit, Winston, you're acting like a journo."

"That's because in my heart of hearts I am, you little shit. So, are you?"

This is the kind of interplay that my dear friend relishes, but I really don't have time for this mess – particularly when I'll need to allow myself time to process this before my afternoon meeting with the man himself. The line goes silent for longer than I'd like, but this is classic Sage, lover of drama and pregnant pauses.

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“Off the record,” he drawls, “nothing will happen soon if at all – that is, unless you want to grant a sit down with your client. I’ll keep you in the know. But let me throw one more wrench into your day. Ardan Delaney got a tip that Hedge is cooking up plans to move forward with a project that hasn’t passed regulatory muster with the FERC.”

“Then how’s he planning to proceed?”

“Illegally. Just don’t know all those details yet, but keep your ears and eyes open, Alexa. And I expect Delaney will come your way looking to get at Hedge soon.”

That gave me pause. The FERC, short for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, held jurisdiction over the reliability and security of projects like HedgeCo’s. Going around the independent agency just wasn’t done and wouldn’t be tolerated, and that would add yet another layer of complexity to an already desperate situation. Discoveries like this, which came more frequently of late, simply added to my inability to understand why Storey | Fischer | Stone would take on Hedge as a client. He was a terrible businessman and an even worse human. My skin turned over on itself at the very thought of having to deal with him, and so far, I’d avoided most direct contacts with him in my role as the firm’s vice president of strategy. I’d continue to hand him off to others as necessary, but something else in Sage’s warning wasn’t sitting right with me.

“So, why are you telling me this?”

Sage waits again before speaking, so now I know something’s up. “Sage?” I prod, growing antsy.

He lets out another huff. “Because, Alexa, Delaney shared some of his reporting with me. I decided to follow up based on what he found. Word is Hedge has a new partner.”

“I’m getting old over here, Vanucci,” I say with a bit more force than intended. “Spit it out already. Who’s this new partner?”

“Dick Warren.”

The name makes my blood run cold.

Chapter 8

Alexa

I've learned it's best to do a bit of homework before dealing with Hedge. This is just one of many reasons that I'm grateful for Sage, my never-ending font of news before it happens. Our conversation left my brain discombobulated when I consider what he's supposedly done and whether I want to even attempt to help him find redemption in the eyes of the public. If you're in this game long enough, all flaks with a conscience reach a crossroads: either their personal convictions diverge from the needs and demands of the client, rendering them at odds with the job itself, or they surrender and bend, setting aside said convictions, relishing instead in the power and challenge of message manipulation. I can't think too much about that right now or I'll turn on my heels and leave Hedge to his own devices. He's surly and mercurial, ruled not by common sense and logic but instead by caprice, ego, and apparently depravity. Just as he believes in his gut instincts, so, too, do I, hence the non-plan I've ginned up for this afternoon's meeting: throw up a useful, interesting distraction.

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For the remainder of the afternoon, I team up with Harlan Wyatt, who leads S|F|S's government relations division, to help bring Hedge around to seeing the reality and the gravity of his situation. But for his part, Hedge seems more focused on keeping us off center with unexpected, vacant challenges instead of mapping out solutions that would save his corporate interests and keep regulators, protestors, and bad PR at bay. Sydell, as expected, simply challenges the good sense in the room. Conservative and risk-averse by nature, she's in rare form as she hurls challenge after challenge for the mere sport of it. In response, we meet each of her (mostly) vacant challenges valiantly with the patience and cunning of parents enduring the tumultuous moods and misdeeds of a head-strong toddler.

Hedge shuts Sydell down as the meeting creeps towards its third hour. We'd begun discussing the only thing that he *really* cared about: how to maintain some degree of control as more and more details of his present situation come to light. Of course, he wants to keep the media lukewarm and unfocused, an unfortunate redirection tactic overused and perfected by our past President. But there was something more behind Hedge's resistance to our efforts. I'll need to give this a lot more thought, but it's clear that he's keen to keep the many regulatory bodies with a vested interest in his movements and projects away from his plans and intentions. His urgency in this regard confirms some of Sage's reporting for me.

"Sydell, I know you get your kicks from busting balls, but I need you to stand down while these fine folks talk me through how I'm gonna get past all this. Can you do that for me now, darlin'?"

I'd been trying to get him to see all day that the first step he needs to take, and the best path towards regaining any sense of control of the messages and the situation, is to appear contrite and compliant to all inquiries. As a means of controlling messages while being transparent, I introduce my distraction, proposing that Hedge allow us to seat and convene an independent oversight committee to investigate his alleged infractions and release a report on its findings. Fully on board with the plan as I lay it out,

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Harlan proposes that they approach a former member of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission as well as the American Petroleum Council's Vice President for Government Affairs. Hedge, however, isn't going for it.

"Sounds like just the kinds of folk I don't want on my committee," he replies.

"First off, Hedge, it's not *your* committee, and I'd strongly advise you to get that notion out of your head before it makes its way out of your mouth," I reiterate for what seems to be the millionth time today. "As we discussed earlier, our job is to help the group feel your influence and see your vision so that they can work towards a more neutral outcome, but you cannot and will not be an active part of the investigative process. Be clear on that."

Hedge fixes his death stare on me as I continue my challenge, fortifying my confidence. After what seems like minutes, he nods but says nothing. All eyes in the room dart between the two of us as our silent battle of wills plays out. If I had to call it, I'd say it's a stalemate.

I press on, then, defending not only Harlan's proposals, but also the dozen or so subsequent names that get tossed about throughout the afternoon. Though it was a hard-fought battle, I emerge victorious – but not for long. Hedge's body language makes it clear that he feels as though he's yielded much too much in the name of fair play. So, it was time to show his hand.

"Now surely, I can throw two names out for consideration, no?" Hedge begins, speaking deliberately and directly to me. "Ben Thomas Gilly and Dr. Dick Warren are both gentlemen of the highest order. Each has earned my respect as well as a place on the dais. See to it that they receive their respective dance tickets."

Now, to everyone else in the room, Hedge's demand seems like nothing more than capricious ranting and executive grandstanding. He'd have his way and his say somehow. But for me, Hedge's demand summons that tricky little ghost for the second time today. This fact, by itself, isn't what troubles me. This apparent bromance with my ex-husband's former partner and business associate still doesn't make good sense. I fight to hide my confusion as my mind wanders off to consider things in closer

detail. For now, or until the connection (and the purpose that Dick Warren would serve) comes to light, it's best that I keep my concerns quiet.

Finally, Harlan breaks the uncomfortable silence that's reverberated throughout the room since Hedge made his demands.

"Alright, then, Hedge. We have a long list of names to work with. I say we adjourn and hit it again fresh with you next Monday morning. The rest of us need time to vet the desired participants."

"Sounds like a plan," I respond evenly. "We have lots of due diligence to get through." I turn to Hedge and give a curt nod as I rush to conclude this session. "Our collective goal here is to ensure that we end up with a panel that appears fair, independent, and impartial. With that goal in mind, understand that it'll take most of the rest of this week to vet and fully understand who and what works best for us, Hedge. Let us do the heavy lifting the right way and come together again on Monday to plan our rollout."

"What the *hell* are you talking about, Alexa? What heavy lifting needs done?"

I'm guessing that Hedge is incredulous at the idea of delaying and potentially having to endure any additional coverage and speculation from the media regarding his business practices. I offer him a knowing, semi-patronizing smile, the kind you display to a frustrated and impatient child who demands your attention at once or else the world will end.

"Hedge, we're all here to make sure we gain control of the flurry of publicity that already is aimed your way. Keep in mind that it's not typical for the subject of scrutiny like HedgeCo to do something as seemingly transparent as to seat an independent oversight panel. So, you can count that in our favor. However, if we don't make sure that each of the members of this panel can pass muster, you could be playing a far worse hand than the one you currently hold."

Hedge sits tight lipped, obviously irritated by the wisdom of my words. He says nothing as Harlan nods in agreement.

The marathon finally concludes about 30 minutes later following Sydell's insipid sermonette on making certain that the

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group understands its top priority until otherwise notified: keep Hedge happy.

I'm now gathering my things to make a fast exit. I'd struggled all meeting to stay on-task because my mind seemed to want to concentrate on one thing and one thing only: Mateo. Just as I reach the door, I'm stopped in my tracks when Hedge erupts, "How about you and I get better acquainted at dinner tonight, Alexa? And I gotta tell ya, honey, you're looking mighty hot today." As he speaks, his steady, lecherous gaze assaults me boldly from head to toe. "Who knows, had you worn a hot little get up like this the last time we met, I mighta actually listened to ya."

He laughs too long at his joke, not seeming to notice or care that he's laughing alone. Now, I'm perfection when it comes to handling louts, especially those I'm paid to rescue from the terrifying den of raw exposure, cross examination, and pontification that comes with attracting negative media coverage. I look at Sydell, who sits gloating as though she's sent father to deal with my insolence. I offer a tight smile and turn to address Hedge.

"Well, then, now that I know how to get your attention, listen up. Your number one enemy is your mouth. You don't know what to say, when or to whom, so let's set some ground rules for you, effective immediately: When I talk," I say, pointing to myself a few times more for effect than anything else, "you listen. You consider. Then, and only then, do we discuss."

He takes a beat too long to nod his agreement, which I consider a win, but of course, I could only hope to be so lucky. He laughs a loud, faux-bass chortle and walks over to me, invading my personal space.

"Sure. I'll keep that in mind. We can talk more about that when I take you to dinner, gorgeous."

"We're not going to dinner, Hedge. As a rule, I don't go out with clients," I say as pleasantly as I can manage. "And please, call me Alexa."

"Bullshit, you go out with clients all the time, A-lex-a," he responds impatiently, placing great emphasis on each syllable in

my name. “Last time I checked, that’s part of being a flak, am I right?”

“You know what I mean, Hedge, and I know what you meant when you asked. So, let’s not play that game. That’s not a line that I will ever cross with *you*. Besides, I already have plans,” I lie proudly, knowing it’ll tweak him.

“Cancel them. You just got a better offer,” he insists, now fully in my face. His eyes hold a steely look of determination as do mine.

“No can do,” I answer again as I back away. When he takes a step to close the space that I’d afforded myself, it’s hard not to show my disgust at his thinking that I’d cave to his whims. It’s also hard to hold back my strong reaction to the cloying scent he calls cologne and to the growing sense of revulsion I feel knowing his secrets. He means to intimidate to get what he wants, and I continue to dig down deep for patience and restraint, praying they can help me withstand this beast of a man. I’m clearly on my own in this with the predator and his pimp, now the only witnesses to this exchange, which is why I’ll have to use the nuclear option to fend him off. I hadn’t planned to tip my hand just yet, but he’s not backing down, and I’m not going to be bullied. So, I launch my opening salvo.

“Besides, Hedge,” I begin, offering a small shoulder shrug and a cocky grin as this coming storm of his dark truths gathers strength, “from what I hear, you like ’em a lot younger than I am, not to mention incapacitated.”

I brace myself when I hear Sydell’s gasp and see Hedge’s brows rise just before his face reddens with anger. Though I don’t think he’s surprised, he’s pissed that I went there. Maybe even a bit impressed.

“Alexa!” Sydell exclaims. “Are you out—”

“Shut up, Sydell,” Hedge spits out. He eyes me with something that looks like a cross between interest and irritation. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I give another small shrug and dig in. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. I’ll just say this: Just because you’ve bought silence from what appears to be the entire state press pool in Texas doesn’t mean that’s going to work for you beyond state lines. See,

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just because they're not writing about your dirt doesn't mean they're not discussing it with colleagues, near and far, trying to verify accounts of your misdeeds and validate sources. That chatter has reached members of the national press corps, who have sources who contend that you've paid several editors quite well to play catch and kill on your behalf. They know your secrets and how you've worked to keep yourself out of the news. From what I've learned, though, between your pay offs and influence peddling, you've left enough breadcrumbs for any tenacious investigative reporter to find. So, what am I talking about? I'm talking about the fact that you seem to enjoy drugging then raping young girls. And I'm saying I'll never give you the opportunity to pull that shit with me."

Hedge stands before me slack-jawed. "That's bullshit," he hisses after a moment. He shakes his head vigorously, his face red with anger, and demands, "Just who the hell did you hear that from?" He wasn't shouting, but he wasn't quiet either. "Tell me. This. Damn. Minute!"

"It really doesn't matter, Hedge," I say. "What you need to be thinking about is how to redirect people from wanting to dig into your personal affairs any more than they already are." He tries to interrupt, but I hold up a hand indicating that I'm not done talking. "That means laying low.

"And Sydell," I continue, shifting my gaze her way as I seize a deliciously timed opportunity, "it also means that your universal change-the-topic strategy can't work this time. Dinner dates, hell, dates of any kind will get the chatter about Hedge's, uh, proclivities, going in force. We already have the challenge of course correcting what's being perceived as his reckless disregard for pretty much anyone other than himself. Let's not make things any more complex by outing a pedophile."

I look back to Hedge, my gaze a silent but stern entreaty to let the subject rest – at least for now.

"So again, Hedge, I will *not* have dinner with you tonight or any other."

Without awaiting anyone's response, I turn to leave.

Act Two: Accountability Calling

A Moment with Truth

I FaceTimed with my sisters last night, and it left me even more depressed and restless than I was before we chatted. Turns out, they're as dejected as I am when it comes to their relationships. My middle sister has had such a tough go of it lately that I fear she's abandoned her coupling goals entirely.

"Everyone runs from Accountability," she huffed, always melodramatic, always on point. "It's hard not to feel threatened by the likes of Your Best Life and False Bravado," she went on. Despite their lack of depth, substance, and authenticity, they're the "it" girls these days because think about it. They've mastered the fine art of staying relevant merely by seeming fabulous over time, which keeps the spotlight trained on them in all their vacuity. I don't love it, but I get it.

Still, I'm not nearly as forlorn as she. I can't allow myself to be because I am the foundation – of our sisterhood, and, according to at least one noble poet, of all knowledge. He also claimed that I'm the cement of societies, but jury's out on that if what I see around me is any indicator. These days, society surely has cast us aside, my sisters and me. As much contempt as there is for Truth,

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there seems to be even more venom towards Accountability, who, as with all middle siblings, is the glue that binds us, stitching us together even as we'd tear and nick each other's moral fabric to shreds. She tends to hold others to, well, account for their actions, leaving them no room to capitulate. That, of course, goes about how you might expect, so no wonder her hopelessness these days.

Even as my little sister, Honesty, and I tried to convince her to see through the dark clouds, she couldn't – or wouldn't – be convinced to even hope for change. We reminded her about Alexa and Mateo. Alexa is invited to create and indulge Deceit each day as her work and personal life travel new frontiers where my mortal frenemy, Influence, holds considerable sway. Yet, Alexa holds to her truths no matter what it might cost her. Then, there's Mateo. He may be tousling with my middle sister at the moment, but my money's on him to follow her lead. Her wager? Well, Accountability is a pessimist by nature, so she's not nearly as hopeful. But she should take heart. Mateo understands the profound change that meeting Alexa represents. He simply needs to examine it more closely. Understand and respect it. And that's what dear friends are for.

Chapter 9

Mateo

I toss a quick glance at the priceless Whitehurst clock humming quietly from the top of my well-worn mahogany bookcase on the opposite side of my office. I'm not sure if I'm looking for answers or if I'm simply counting the hours until I see her again. Either way, it's pathetic. *I'm* pathetic.

Sighing, I look around for something to busy my mind. I eye the stack of papers sitting in the middle of my desk and consider swiping them in the trash. At the beginning of each semester, I give my new students the ungraded task of letting me get to know them and why they've signed up for my class. I usually look forward to diving in as this offers a glimpse of what I can expect from them for the next four and a half months. It also helps me get to know them faster, which is a plus. Today, though, I can't seem to find the concentration to do much more than think about the beautiful, broken woman I want so damned bad. I'm not sure when it happened, but I've stopped lying to myself. I'm in deep and have been for months. Thanks to my stunt with the running club and the game I created to get inside her thoughts some more, she's beginning to bend. But she's still playing keep-away with her

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feelings, and I need these barriers between us gone. It's all I seem to think about. Good thing I'm a patient man. It's usually how I get what I want. And what I want most is Alexa in my life. In my bed, too, but that comes in time. Seriously. No really. I can wait for all that.

I pick up a pen from the desk and pull at the tension blooming at the base of my neck. I need to do something with my pent-up energy and growing frustration. I know I won't be able to give these papers my full attention, but it's worth a try. Anything's better than falling deeper into my feelings – feelings I didn't know I could experience until now.

“Fuck it,” I murmur as I dive into the first paper before me.

“Fuck what, Matt?” I look up to find my buddy, Becket Oliver, standing in the door to my office. He's taking a sabbatical this semester to finish writing a book on personality disorders, so this is the last place I expected to see him.

“The hell, Beck? Shouldn't you be somewhere meeting deadlines?”

“I've written my 2,000 words for the day, man. But I forgot some notes that I need in my office and dropped in to grab them. And what crawled up your ass?”

I shake my head because I'm not trying to hear his mess tonight. Beck is a good guy, but he's like a blood hound if you let him into your head. He'll root around until he finds what he's looking for, retrieves it, and leaves you to clean up the mess.

“Just not feeling these papers, man. What's up?”

“I thought we could head over to Marisol's, throw back a beer or two and chill. You down?”

I'm not a big beer drinker, but this evening, I wouldn't mind a distraction from this self-torture.

“Sure,” I say. “It'll be better than sitting here bleeding all over these papers.”

Ten minutes later, we're seated at the bar in one of our favorite haunts around the corner. Marisol's thrives on the college crowd but still manages to attract a steady stream of neighborhood patrons and passersby. It's Monday evening, so the place is relatively empty, and I'm strangely grateful for that. In full

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disclosure, I've found many of my hook ups in this place, or more to the point, they found me. Never one to chase, I let women come to me. They *do* choose you, after all. Well, for the most part. But Alexa isn't like the women I've messed with, which is exactly why, for the first time, I find myself in pursuit.

"Are you going to tell me what's up your ass tonight? Something's on your mind, and don't even try to lie about it," Beck barks from the barstool next to me. I'm startled that I was so inside my own head that his voice cuts through my thoughts. I attempt to deflect him by waving a hand his way.

"I'm fine."

Beck considers my words before taking another drink from his beer stein. After draining nearly half the dark amber stout, he shakes his head and shoots me a knowing grin.

"Nah. You're not. Try again, Matt."

"Just got some stuff on my mind is all, Beck," I say before chugging from my own frosty mug. I grit my teeth and brace for the grilling I'm about to get when he laughs.

"I have to call bullshit, man. Nothing gets you down. Like ever. So, what gives?"

"Damn, you're worse than a woman, Beck," I say, sucking my teeth.

He reaches for a toothpick on the bar, places it between his teeth and points at me.

"Maybe, but I'm on to something here. Come on, tell Dr. Beck what's eating ya."

"Ok, man. It's a girl." I cave because maybe talking about her will either bring clarity or reveal my insanity.

"It usually is, but not for you. I'm listening."

"Remember my guest lecturer a few weeks ago—"

"I knew it!" he interrupts and points at me sporting a shit-eating grin. "Ha ha! The pull between you two is ridiculous even though you both seem to think no one can see it. Go on."

"Anyway," I continue, "we've been hanging out, getting to know each other. But the girl is slow to trust."

"What? You can't close the deal?"

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“It’s not like that, Beck. I’m not looking to fuck her. Well, that’s not all I want anyway.”

“So, what? Are you saying you want a relationship with her?”

I think I have for a while even though I didn’t easily admit to that. At first, it was easier to flirt and finesse my way through our interactions. It’s no wonder she kept turning me down when I pressed her to go out with me. That shit didn’t feel good. But in some odd way, it made me that much more determined to get to know her. The longer it takes to get her to yes, the more time I get to see and understand what makes her happy. What makes her sad. To see what she dreams of and wonder if I can help her make it come true. Even when she thinks she’s being guarded, she’s sharing herself with me through her reactions to the world around her. A look, a sigh. An odd quirk of the mouth or flash of expression. I’ve been the guy, the only one I suspect, to see her unfold herself this way. I think this is the crux of what propels us into the way-more-than-friends zone. I want more of her, all of her.

I run a hand through my hair, parts of which feel like a wild mess after a full day of hand raking and hair pulling.

“That’s what I want.”

“And you’ve told her this?”

I side eye him, feeling more exposed than I’d like. “She knows.” I chug the rest of my beer and grab the barkeep’s attention for a refill.

His question grates, but I get it. We guys often assume our intentions are clear when, to women, they’re anything but. He laughs as the bartender places the refill in front of me with a salute before heading off to serve the small group of women who keep shooting inviting glances our way from their base camp at the opposite end of the bar.

“You sure about that, man? Have you said the words to her, or are you expecting her to realize that eye-fucking her for the whole world to see is evidence of your intent?”

Well, shit. I want to deck him, but I take a moment to think this through. I smile to myself but keep my eyes on my beer.

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“I can’t help how I may look at her, Beck. She’s beautiful. She’s intelligent, and she doesn’t fall for any of my bullshit.” I grin as I say the words, feeling strangely comforted as I spill my truths. “She may not have said the words, but yeah, she knows. I see it in her eyes, and she’s pretty easy to read. She’s just scared is all.”

I spend the next minutes laying out our backstory to him. Beck studies me closely as I speak, almost as if he’ll find something more than what I’m saying if he looks hard enough. He nods when I’m done and pins me with his stare.

“You’re scared, too. Scared of what she makes you feel. Scared of fucking it up. And you can punch me if I’m wrong, you’re falling for this girl, no?”

Falling is an active verb, suggesting an ongoing action in the present tense. Since we’re being honest here, I cop to what’s really eating at me. I’ve already fallen. If that wasn’t the case, I wouldn’t have resorted to training for a fucking duathlon with a side of bullshit gaming as a way to spend uninterrupted time together. I park my thoughts for a moment and consider what this means. Maybe she’s not the only one running from what’s clearly true. Maybe I’m only now admitting the depth of my feelings. That would explain the unsettled restlessness that’s taken ahold of me since I saw her over the weekend. I nearly forget Beck’s sitting with me as he forges on to his next piece of psychotherapy.

“Look, if you weren’t so busy trying to charm and finesse, you’d see this clearly, too.”

“Ok, Dr. Phil, since you want me to spell it out,” I begin, ignoring the truth of his statement, “here it is. I’m scared, ok? I don’t do relationships. But it’s too late to pull back. When we met, I thought I’d nail her and get her out of my system. But that’s never been all I wanted from her. It scared me from the start. It scares me now. And truth is, I’ve already fallen for her. I’m just not sure how to cut through her defenses and get her to admit that she feels the same way. And once I do, what then?”

I grab my brew as I consider how much more to share with Beck. I’m typically not one to think out loud, and this conversation is starting to grate, as I knew it would. On the other hand, I haven’t

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felt this much clarity since Alexa and I said goodbye on Saturday. I curse as my internal war wages on.

“Well, you could always blow off some steam with one of those girls who can’t take their eyes off you down there while you plot your next move.”

I find I’m insulted by the suggestion. Nevertheless, I keep my eyes trained ahead of me and consider my position for a moment. It’s not like I haven’t thought of using a willing body to manage my thirst for Alexa. But that honestly hasn’t happened for a while, it’s not happening this evening, and it’s certainly not going down with any of these barflies as willing as they may be. I turn my head to Becket and shrug my indifference.

“Not interested.”

“My point exactly. You’ve got it bad, my friend.” He chuckles and points at me. “I’ve never seen you turn down easy ass.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Then you haven’t been paying attention, my friend.”

“But see that’s where you’re wrong. I saw you with her that day she was leaving your class. It’s clear you’re into each other. I just didn’t figure you for a pussy is all.”

I narrow my eyes and meet his challenge. “You think what you need to, asshole. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

He considers me a moment and nods. “Ok. But something’s got you on edge today. You’re here with me but not really. And the same place your mind is now is where it was when I dropped into your office. What really gives?”

He sits there chewing on his toothpick. I lift my hands in surrender and turn to answer.

“Let’s say I’ve changed the game up a bit between us, set things up so we have to spend more time together. I wonder if that was a mistake because I’m not sure it changed a damn thing.”

Beck laughs and I bristle, narrowing my eyes at what sounds like mockery. “Dude,” he says as his laughter dies down, “you’re caught up in the chase, but looks to me like you might want to figure where your own head is at before you go club her on the head and drag her back to your cave.”

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“Funny, asshole.” I give my beer my attention while I tie off that wound. “I wouldn’t feel like this if she didn’t mean something to me.”

“Nobody’s laughing, Matt.”

He fingers the toothpick sitting idly in the corner of his mouth as he regards me. I continue to sit in profile but have a clear, peripheral view of his eyes locked on me.

“See, if I follow you, it sounds like you set up time to be in each other’s space. But that sounds more like cat and mouse than anything else. By the time you end this shit-ass stunt of yours, know what you want. Lay things out for her if you can get her to take you seriously. Then you’ll both know where you stand. Shit! I can’t believe I have to spell this out for your grown ass!”

“Sorry we can’t all be as emotionally intelligent as you, Beck,” I smile, but his words sting because he’s right. I don’t chase, so this feels all kinds of wrong to me. But so does continuing down this path like we’re back in *bachillerato* passing love notes while the teacher’s back is turned.

“Man, I’m serious. I’ve never seen you like this, and while it’s all kinds of fun to watch and give you shit, you’re obviously not happy. This girl has your mind all fucked up, but if I know you as well as I think, you only have yourself to blame. I bet you’ve relied on that pretty mug and what you probably think is Latin charm to reel her in. From the brief exchange I had with her, though, that shit won’t work on a woman like that. So, tell her how you feel and see where things stand. Otherwise, you’ll be in this stupid loop inside your head. And let me tell ya, you’re no damn fun right now.”

He raises his brows begging me to challenge him as though he’s just solved the mystery of life. I raise what’s left of my beer to him in toast, throw back the remaining liquid, and say the only thing I can.

“You make sense, Beck. I guess you’re right.”

“You know I’m right, genius. And hey, all jokes aside. If she’s who you want, you have to be willing to take the gamble to get her into your life in a meaningful way.” He looks away for a moment before pressing on. “I wish someone had been there to tell me this

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before Kaylee decided to call it quits. I wanted everything with her, man. I just didn't or couldn't face it at the time. Believe me, if I had it to do over I would. So, don't be me."

I grasp his shoulder, appreciating his sincerity more than I know how to tell him. I simply say, "I hear you. And thanks, man. I appreciate you."

"Then show me your love by the way you pay me. Next round's on you."

Chapter 10

Saturday, September 7
Alexa

Over the past two weeks, my life has found a comfortable rhythm even though its many facets have commanded mammoth slices of my time and attention. My weekdays and nights have been filled with work and the boys, and as we can manage it, Mateo. I've been impressed with our ability to sandwich our weekday training sessions into my already overscheduled life. Then again, it's no sacrifice to make time for what's rapidly becoming necessary and addictive. I've also spent the past few Saturday mornings with the man. Whether or not this was his intention when he showed up for the first training session, I can't be certain. What is clear is that when we aren't on the trails, we're getting under each other's skin. Last week, week two of our game of emotional space invaders, I challenged him to avoid using his uncanny powers of telekinesis. That's when something interesting and vital became all-too obvious: our mental telepathy can't be turned off. Our emotions seem to be inextricably connected. Either that, or we've simply turned a corner and given in to what we feel. Exhibit A: I text him when something funny happens. He

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calls in between classes to share far-out ideas from a student. Exhibit B: We FaceTime just because. Things have shifted irrevocably between us, which both delights and paralyzes me.

During the work week, I have little time to consider what any of this means as my responsibilities grow more demanding and intense. Between dealing with Sydell's hostility and trying to keep Hedge from making an already tense set of circumstances worse, there's barely any time to focus on my budding romance, which is probably a good thing. Sage continues with his news gathering, feeding me ever-more incriminating details to corroborate the things he's learned about Hedge. He hasn't shared an imminent publication date with me, but he doesn't have to. I know how he works, and I know how well he ties down his sourcing before going to print. The story won't drop today or tomorrow, but he or a surrogate will offer Hedge an opportunity to rebut on the record sooner than later. None of that, however, means that Mateo hasn't succeeded in distracting me. I fill any "free" moments daydreaming about the man who has become a vital part of me.

I try not to think too much about that as we complete this week's training club workout. Each week, he presses his obvious advantage with me a little more, quickly bringing us to a place where neither of us can deny or ignore that we are far more than the chemistry between us. He's managed to talk me into going for a ride on his motorcycle after our run today, so I took a Lyft to this morning's training session. I'm both thrilled and terrified that I agreed to hop on the back of this death machine.

Mateo rides a black Ducati Multistrada with red trim, and the bike is an exquisite extension of the man. Sleek, powerful, and sexy, I eye it with the same keen interest and trepidation that he himself inspires. The weather's unusually cool for early September, and the skies are threatening to erupt at any time. I'm not sure what to expect as he hops on and offers me a helmet.

"You're scared?" he asks with amusement as I eye the protective gear dubiously. I shift my eyes to him and raise my brows.

"Ya think?"

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“Come on, Lex,” he chides, “you know I’ve got you.”

He straddles the bike, his long legs anchoring the intimidating beast like sturdy dual kickstands, and motions for me to come closer.

“Here, let me help you,” he offers, pointing to the helmet.

My body moves at his command, and I hand him the heavy protective gear. He unclasps the strap, gently but firmly covers my head, and secures it beneath my chin.

“There. Now listen. Climb on behind me, get your feet comfortable on the foot pegs and grab my waist. Once you’re good with that, we’ll take off. Let me do all the work. When we reach turns, I’ll be leaning to steer the bike. Try not to lean with me. If we’re in a left turn, look over my left shoulder. If we’re leaning to the right, look to my right. And that’s it. If at any point you get uncomfortable or need to get my attention, tug twice on my jacket. And that’s about it. Once we’re back at your place, I’ll let you know when it’s safe to get off.”

Still unsure, I nod and bite my lip. “You make it sound simple.”

His smile melts me. “It is, love. Now, come ride with me.”

Once we’re on our way, I eventually relax into him, enjoying and fearing the closeness. I enjoy the sensation of the wind needling my cheeks as I hold on for dear life. How can I feel so out of my element yet know I’m home? And it’s not because I’ve strayed from my comfort zone. It’s because I’m experiencing all the newness with him. Contentment washes over me as we travel roads that I’ve driven more times than I can count. With and because of him, I see the landscape with new appreciation as we race down the scenic, two-lane highway dotted with towering trees and thick, green shrubs. I’m experiencing everything around me as never before, and that’s probably why I’m strangely sad when we reach my house about 25 minutes later. Mateo cuts the engine and removes his helmet, turning to catch my gaze. His look is expectant, and though I try to make it seem like I’m unaffected, the smile I try desperately to hold back blossoms fully. We both laugh.

“See, I told you you’d love it.”

“It didn’t suck, I guess,” I say playfully.

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“Uh huh. You’ll be begging me for another ride. And soon. Watch,” he volleys back with a chuckle and a wink. Now hold on and plant your feet.”

He gets off the bike then extends his hand to steady me as I do the same. I’m suddenly feeling smart for letting the boys go hiking with Lindy’s son, Luke, for the day. It gives Mateo and me time alone, and although I’m not sure what that will mean, I’m more than happy with the possibilities.

Mateo

I’m pleasantly surprised when Alexa tells me that her boys are gone for the day. I love kids, I do, but being here just the two of us gives me the chance to force her hand some more. We head down to her basement and out the back entrance to a garden. It’s immaculately trimmed and whimsical, bits of her passion and beauty rooted all around me.

“Is this your work?” I ask gesturing to the roses and shrubs and various blooming plant varieties circling the space.

“Guilty,” she answers with a shy grin. “It’s a way to let off steam. Grab a little peace in the midst of chaos.”

“Well, your hard work paid off. It’s beautiful. Calming.”

“Thanks.” She takes a seat and points to the one across from her. “Please,” she says gesturing towards the chair. “Can I offer you some lunch or, maybe a glass of wine? I know it’s early in the afternoon—”

“Never too early for wine,” I tease, and she laughs.

“My motto exactly. Day drinking – since 2020.”

She laughs, excuses herself, and heads inside. She’s back shortly with two glasses, which she places on the patio table between us along with the wine bottle.

“Are you hungry? I can—”

“No, Lex. I’m fine. In fact,” I begin, realizing she’s buzzing around because she’s nervous. That will not do, so I stand up to grab her hand and walk her over to the seat beside mine. “Let’s play another game?”

She cocks her head and considers me for a moment, but I don't give her the chance to respond. "Yes, another game because games are fun. This round is called Lies and Damned Lies."

"You're making this up, right?"

"Absolutely. And it'll be fun. Here's how it works. One of us makes a statement. The other decides whether it's the truth, a lie, or a damned lie. If you're wrong, you have to drink."

"A drinking game? You want to make this a drinking game?"

"C'mon. Have some fun with me, love. We might even learn a little something more about each other." I settle back in my chair and jump right in. "I'll go first. I haven't been on a date in almost six years."

As she pulls her legs up into her seat, she smiles and shakes her head. "Oh, no, no, no! That's a lie, you ass! A straight-up, boldfaced lie!"

"Ah, but it's not, sweetheart. Now drink up," I say with a wicked smile and a wink.

Alexa blinks slowly as she processes my response. "No wait. Do we get to talk about that?"

"Eventually, but for now know this. I didn't date. I may have met a woman at a bar and had a few drinks. But those women were there to pass time. They were never for dating. Just for fucking. And that doesn't count. Now drink up and move on or you'll break the flow," I reply before taking a sip from my glass. "Your turn."

"Well, damn," she laughs and gives me props for my honesty. "Heaven forbid we interrupt the flow," she retorts sarcastically. "Ok, then. Let's see. Tristan, my oldest, changed his name when he was 11. He was actually born Trenton Aurelius Caverton III."

I try but fail to hold back my howl of laughter. "Now that's a damned lie," I snort. "For the love of God, please tell me that's a damned lie. Who'd name a child that?"

"Well, I did, though I admit that it was under duress. So, I believe that means that *you* must drink," Alexa replies through her own giggle fit. By now, I'd said to hell with trying to stave off the deep-down, belly-aching hilarity inherent in her revelation. I sip my drink and collect myself once more.

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“Oh, hell. I’m sorry about that, but poor kid. No wonder he changed his name.”

She raises a brow, telling me there’s more to that story. But I won’t press. “I guess it’s my turn again,” I say, debating this next bit but moving forward because it needs to be said. “So, here’s the thing: My father made his money as a coca farmer and became a chief in the Medellín cartel.”

“Bullshit. That’s a lie,” Alexa replies.

“No, love, it’s not. Please drink up. Drink deeply.”

“Holy hell. Somehow you don’t strike me as the drug lord type,” she chortles, taking a long swig from the nearly empty glass.

“No, that I am not,” I answer, replenishing her wine.

“So, is this the part where I should be saying nice to know you and run for my life?”

I chuckle but answer quickly. I’m always quick to disassociate myself from my roots. “Don’t you dare,” I say as I lean forward again, reach for her hand, and lightly stroke her knuckles. “I can assure you that I am nothing like the man who raised me. *I’m not a raging, murdering asshole.* Now, tell me something good.”

I study her for a few moments to gauge her reaction to my parentage, working hard to blank my face of any emotion. She watches me just as closely as I carefully pull the curtain back into place, knowing full well we’ll revisit the topic another time. I relax back into my seat again, immediately missing the feel of her as I drop her hand. It’s her turn once she’s satisfied with what she sees.

“I’m adopted.”

On its face, this isn’t a big thing. Maybe she’s just figuring out what she wants to say next. Don’t know, but I mark this.

“That seems to be true.”

She nods and looks up at me. “And I know who my birth parents are,” she adds quickly. “It’s a simple story with a twist made complex by pride and regret. Maybe it’ll come up one day if we ever run out of useful things to talk about.”

“When you’re ready to talk about it, I’m here.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes until she offers, “Thank you. One day.”

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“Ok,” I continue, “back to me.” I draw in a breath to steady myself as I offer up this next bit of insight. I’m not sure why I feel I need to tell her, but I can’t stop the words from falling from my lips.

“I was in love a long time ago.” I pause then press on. “I fell for her when I was 15. We dated until I finished grad school here in the States. And when I went back to Colombia, we got engaged. The night before our wedding, I found out she’d married my brother instead.”

Alexa sits tall in her chair, obviously horrified by my share. She grabs my arm and squeezes it gently.

“I think that’s the most fucked up thing I’ve ever heard. And I’m so sorry that that happened to you.”

I consider her for a moment, a small, wistful smile on my lips. “How do you know it’s the truth?”

“Because I see it in your eyes, Mateo. I see the effort it took for you to tell me. So yeah, it’s the truth. A sad and sorry truth.”

I put my hand over hers, where she continues stroking my forearm. “Looks like I’m not the only one with a knack for seeing beyond the surface. Yes, it was fucked up, but it’s the past.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“Do you still love her?”

“For a long time, I thought I did.”

“So, let me guess. That’s when you chose to live life as a man-whore. Am I right?”

“Man-whore?!” I laugh. “Is that what you call it?”

Her cheeks pink to that beautiful dusky rose color that makes me so crazy and does strange things to my chest. “Well, yeah, Mateo. Look, word is, you run through almost as many co-eds as American can admit in a year.”

“Well, then,” I retort, slightly shamed by her representation of my life over the past 10 years. I swallow and bite my bottom lip. “Didn’t know you were keeping tabs like that. But I fully admit that what Janeilia did had everything to do with why I fucked pretty much anything with a skirt and a sway in her hips who looked my way. It was my way of dealing with the pain and locking

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down my emotions. That's part of my past, though," and I pause, hoping she'll find the rest of the words that I'm not saying. *That's not me. It's the armor that protected my heart from the unknown until you shattered the shell and found your way behind the fortress.* "But no," I continue after a beat, "I don't love her. I'm not sure I ever really did."

"Why do you say that?"

"It was a first love at best. Maybe even infatuation. But not real love."

She smiles and leans back in her chair. I immediately miss having her close to me.

"Why didn't I know this?"

"It's not something I make a habit of discussing. It's my past, and I like to keep it that way."

"Hmm," she replies, and I can tell that she wants to know more. I keep my face as open to that possibility as I can, but I'm more than ready to shut this down and move on to something else, anything else.

"And what about your brother? I didn't know you had a brother. Do you two still have a relationship?"

I exhale and shake my head. "No, but let's talk about this another day. Neither of them is worth the time it would take to explain."

Alexa nods as she takes note of my deflection. But she doesn't press. She isn't put off. She nods after a moment and gives me a smile.

We go back and forth this way for a few rounds more, and in that time, I learn she studied classical ballet growing up, which I decide is what laid the foundation for her incredible ass and legs. Her body screams sensuality with her graceful strides and confident gait. Unfortunately, she faced and eventually abandoned the tough climb to study dance professionally as have many non-white dancers thanks to deeply rooted biased views regarding how a ballerina and her body should look. She instead learned to play lead guitar and became good enough to start a rock band with her bestie Lindy on the keys. But even that decision drew grumbles and criticisms from people who had a hard time consuming

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driving guitar licks and high-energy rock beats created by women of African descent.

Having catalogued these bits and pieces, I'm more intrigued than ever by this lovely, broken woman. So, when it's my turn again, I decide to make it count. An ominous-sounding clap of thunder captures our attention instead. That's not what makes Alexa start, though. She dashes for her phone when an incoming text tone places her on high alert.

"That's Luke. I need to see what's up," she explains.

Locating the phone only brings her temporary relief. She huffs and begins chewing nervously on her bottom lip.

"Everything ok, love?"

"I'm not sure. Luke says they were just told to leave the hiking trails and find shelter from a severe storm coming this way."

She looks up to me from her perch on the arm of her patio chair, but I don't see panic. Determined, she holds up a finger to excuse herself as she dials Luke's phone. The hiking trail closed well enough in advance of the weather that Luke would have time to take cover. Over the next few moments, with poise and determination, she talks the young man through finding and reserving the closest available hotel room. I'm sure it helped that her own trio were excited to be facing this adventure away from home, judging from the interplay of voices and cheers carrying through the phone line. After ensuring that Luke has the credit card his mother left him for such occasions, she signs off, promising to check in on the boys once they've had a chance to get settled.

I clear my throat and watch her thoughtfully. "All in a day's work, Super Lexi?"

She seems surprised at first and then embarrassed. "Nah, this is what being a parent is about. Being ready to handle the unexpected crap that comes your way."

Once again, the threatening storm signals its intent, rumbling more loudly this time than last.

"Want to put your bike in the garage? No sense in letting it get drenched."

I chuckle. "It'll be fine. No need to go to any trouble."

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“No trouble, but I think it’s kinda necessary.”

She walks to where I’m standing and shows me her phone, which displays a severe weather alert a lot like the one that ended her kids’ hike early.

“Just go get your bike and put it in my garage, Da Rocha,” she commands.

I can’t explain what happens next, but I see her change before me. Her shoulders slump slightly, and I can see more clearly inside of her than ever.

“It’s not a little bit of rain. And I can’t imagine,” she pauses and swallows before smiling to herself. She takes a few steps closer and puts a hand on my chest, “I don’t want you to get caught in that. Please. Put your bike in the garage. Stay.”

Her last word comes across as tentative, and she slides her hand from my chest to my forearm before pulling it back completely and stepping away from me. Missing the feel of her yet again, I step into her space. I reach for her hand and bring it to my heart, squeezing it, my best answer right now to her ask. It’s not that I can’t find my voice. But I can’t be certain that I won’t say some things that she’s not ready to hear. It’s the first time she’s willingly let me see what she’s feeling, so some caution on my part is probably a good idea. Thankfully, she saves us both from drowning in this emotional whirlpool.

“I’ll go open the garage from the back.”

She steps away and clears her throat, directing me to the path that leads to the garage entrance. By the time I get there, I’m drenched, and so is she as she stands along the narrow path directing me to take a turn I may otherwise have missed, an entrance tucked away amidst shrubs and a pair of shade trees. I pull into the garage, shut down my bike, and grab the small bag I keep stowed beneath my seat so I can change into the dry clothes I tossed inside. She runs in after me and turns to grab for the pull cord to close the garage. With its end stuck between the bottom of the door and the ceiling, she can’t reach the trapped loop to bring it down. I walk to her, place my hands on her shoulders to stop her movements, and gently move her to my left. I reach for

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the cord and tug it a little until the door begins its slide back to the ground.

“Thank you,” she says when I turn back to face her.

I wave her off. “No need. I should thank you, though.”

She frowns. “For asking me to stay.”

Though she fights at first to hide it, I see clearly how vulnerable she’s feeling. I know what it took her to let me see her concern.

“Yeah, Da Rocha,” she says quietly as she holds out her hand to me. “We should probably get out of these wet clothes. Come inside.”

I grasp her chilly palm and follow her lead to a fairly large mudroom and into her kitchen. She signals that she’ll be back and disappears around the corner. She returns moments later with a couple of towels and offers me one.

“Well, if we’re going to be here, we might as well make it a party. How about I meet you downstairs in about 30 minutes. You can use the bathroom in the basement if you’d like. You’ll find a linen closet there and can help yourself to whatever you need.”

I thank her and because I can help myself no longer, I step into her, giving into this torrent of emotion swirling around us and kiss her lips softly. Her arms slip around my waist and up my back as I deepen the kiss, and we fall into a frenzied tangle. It takes all of my control to reign in the rush of pent-up want that consumes me as I explore her beautiful lips, lick my tongue into her mouth and just feel. Her taste is sweet, a promise, a preview, the icing on this first kiss. The first meaningful one anyway. It’s heady to feel her give in as our well-checked passion detonates. But something urges me to slow us down. I’ve come to respect the passion between us, to revere its power. There’s a reason we’ve kept this in a bottle. And I’d be stupid to set those reasons aside just now. Reluctantly, and drawing on all my strength, I bring this seriously hot exploration to an end. We aren’t exactly gasping for air when we pull apart, but we both wear the evidence of our arousal, both physical and emotional, prominently.

“I’m gonna, um, go,” she says quietly, pointing to the doorway and looking up at me through hooded, dazed eyes. I step up to

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close the gap because I'm afraid she'll shut herself off again. I brush my fingers down the side of her cheek and kiss her there.

"Hurry back," I say before backing away, picking up my bag, heading to the basement and directly for the shower, where I beat one out right quick and regroup.

Alexa

"Let's finish our game."

Mateo looks divine, his hair freed from his trademark ponytail and still wet from the shower when I return to the basement apartment with a charcuterie tray. He's changed into dark jeans, which hang deliciously low and hug his perfectly chiseled ass and deeply muscled thighs just right, and an olive V-neck t-shirt that looks as though it were hand crafted especially, lovingly for him. The sense of expectation in his eyes as he speaks hooks into me. But who am I kidding? He's held me and my reawakened libido captive since that kiss upstairs. I'm still not certain if this unexpected turn of events is blessing or warning, but I'm choosing to believe in the upside, to go with it and see where that takes me. Where it leads us.

Ten minutes later, we've spread our snacks on the floor and are comfortably wrapped up in light conversation, giving us the chance to cool off and settle into each other in a non-sex charged atmosphere. We've always been able to fill our time together discussing everything and nothing. It's one of the things I love most about spending time with him.

My inward reflection is halted by the sights and sounds of the storm outside. By now, the rain is a liquid curtain whipping relentlessly beyond the sliding glass door. I see sticks and debris from the force of the winds and the deluge of the storms and worry briefly as I scan the wreckage so far.

"You look worried."

I chuckle. "For my roses, yes. It's silly but it's real. They're my babies, too."

He slumps back against the sofa and extends his long legs in front of him. "How'd you get into rose gardening? You don't seem the type."

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“What is the type?” I ask, greatly invested in his answer as I scoot closer to sit beside him, settling into him and another glass of wine.

“I picture little old ladies with too much time and not enough love in their lives.”

His reply takes me back to the place where I picked up the gardening bug, and I wonder if he knows how right he is. “Score for me on at least one of those points. So, I guess it’s not that off-brand after all, huh?”

“But isn’t that by choice, love?”

“Maybe a little. But over time, it just didn’t seem worth the effort to find the one who’s not going to axe-murder your heart. I wasn’t even sure he existed.”

I shrug and frown slightly. This is a deeply personal part of myself that he’s about to pick at. And I just insinuated that he’s something that I’m not at all yet sure that he is. I’m in for a penny and all but shaky still because giving this to him feels hopeful. And intimate. Risky.

“So, I think it’s time for the lightning round.”

I look to Mateo in confusion, but before I can ask what he’s talking about, he fills in the blanks for me.

“Back to our game. Here are your rules: We’ll ask each other three questions. You give brief answers for each – no explanation. Then, you pick one of the three answers to learn more about. I’ll do the same.”

“And the object of the round?”

“To figure out what makes you think I’d break your heart.”

He pauses for a moment as if debating whether to say what else is on his mind. He clears his throat and presses on.

“And to get you to see me. To see past what you think and get you to trust what you feel.”

Instead of awaiting my reply, he reaches over and tugs me by the elbow, urging me closer until I’m nestled between his legs with my back against his chest and his arms locked around my waist. He adjusts me to the side and moves until our eyes meet.

“I’ll begin. Why did you stop dating?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Really?”

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“Woman, can you just answer the question? Yes, really. I don’t want your PR answer, so don’t waste time trying to find the right words to say it. Just tell me. Tell me why.”

I’m sobered by his scolding because he’s right. It’s instinct in such situations to scramble for emotional cover under the right words or phrases, protecting my feelings from prying minds and unwelcome judgment. I sigh and exhale, boiling my answer down the best way I know how.

“It was messy and unfulfilling. I have children to consider, and the guys I met after my divorce were never worthy of the time it would take to fit them into my life.”

I count it a win when I’m not hyperventilating as I tell him this. And then I smile because it feels good to share this honesty with him.

“Was that so painful?”

“Not one bit,” I answer, almost settled into the rawness of this exchange.

“Good. Your turn, then.”

I close my eyes and consider what I most need to know about this man who makes me feel everything except the certainty that the two of us make sense.

“What’s your biggest regret?”

I’m not sure what I hope to learn from his answer, but it feels like a good place to begin my much-needed fishing expedition. Though he gives me his smile, his eyes shutter for the slightest moment. I note this but set aside any judgment. Just as I squirm when he lobs hotseat questions my way, he might be understandably antsy about sharing the deeper parts of himself when they’re accustomed to being shrouded in darkness, available only for his eyes to see and his heart to feel. He tightens his grip around my waist and leans in toward my ear.

“Not meeting you sooner.”

I pull back from his touch a little, equal parts surprised and disappointed by his words. He may mean what he says, but the words come laced with something that feels insincere to me. As the game’s rules dictate, I’ll need to take my feelings under advisement for the next couple of rounds. So, I nod, raise my

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brows slightly to let him see my disapproval, and say, “Ok. Back to you.”

He nods and moves on. “Ok. Second question: What do you dream of?”

I frown. “That’s really broad. Care to be more specific?”

He shrugs. “No. I want you to interpret it how you need to. We all have dreams for ourselves. What are yours?”

It’s a great question. It’s been a while since I gave myself the space to consider such things. It’s not a practical question, and I’ve structured a life for myself that only deals in what’s necessary and pressing in real time. It doesn’t consider the future in fine detail because I have no time for fanciful things. I sigh and return his shrug.

“You know, I’ll have to think on this more one day. But I want a life that allows me the flexibility to do something I love surrounded by the people I love. People talk about living your best life. I think for me, that’s what that would look like, in its most basic form anyway.”

He bends to kiss me on the forehead and lingers there. I turn my head slightly to meet his eyes, and the moment arrests us both. This maddening loop of emotions threatens to sweep me up and set me adrift, yet the still-small voice inside warns to tread lightly. It’s not a negative, per se, but the mind wants to know more before the heart goes leaping off some cliff. I need to know more of him, need to see him put himself out there, so I decide to key in on something he put out into the universe during our last gaming session.

“Why haven’t you dated?”

He shakes his head slightly and answers, “I told you—”

“No,” I interrupt, winging this as I go, “you told me that you haven’t dated in over six years. I’m asking you why.”

He searches my eyes and swallows as he tries to figure out what I’m after. I know the look because I often try to hide myself, much as he is now, when he’s trying to pick me apart. He shrugs slightly and says, “Took too much effort. And it kept my life simpler, I guess.”

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I hum, satisfied this time that his answer is truly, genuinely on point. It's not the whole story, but it's not a lie. But before I can congratulate myself too much, he sighs and asks his final question. "Lexi, why do you keep fighting this?"

Mateo

That was not at all my final question. It escaped before I could reign it in. But the energy between us rules me as we embrace this found time. She pulls back to look at me, her eyes wide but not closed off. She's clearly still not comfortable with letting me this close, but at least she's not remote any longer.

"I'm not sure I should trust you, Mateo. You're cagey. And you scare me."

I expect her to say more. When she doesn't, I shake my head. "That's it?"

"You said be brief. Basically, that's it."

She does a good job hiding the smile that wants to spread her pretty lips. I grunt, feeling slightly punked at my own game. I'll need a way to swing the advantage back my way, so I spend the next moments considering that while she considers her final question.

"So then for my final question, let's see." She looks to the ground then back to me. "Will I regret this?"

She swallows and waits for my reassurance as I move closer and hover just beyond her personal space, a hint of a smile playing on my lips when I finally answer.

"Lexi, trust me."

What I see in her eyes is the same fear and fascination, the warnings and the excitement I feel when I'm with her. I think something happens when you let the truth navigate. I'm not sure how ok I am with all this. But I am sure that I can't let her get away with fighting it anymore.

"That settles it," I move on, determined to break her resolve. "You leave me no choice but to choose my last question for more discussion."

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I pull up to the sofa and reach down to bring her up beside me. I refill our wine glasses, and she takes a healthy drink immediately. As she returns her glass to the side table, I prompt her again.

“Tell me, Lexi. Why won’t you trust me, and why are you still scared?”

She exhales hard and looks to the ground. When she gifts me with her eyes again, I see a storm to rival the one outdoors.

“I’ve tried to find some way so that maybe I could hold back just a little of what I feel for you. You always see through it, through me, really. That’s because the space in my heart, where no one’s ever reached, is so completely filled by you. Controlled by you. On any given day, you completely beguile me. The next, you pull away. It’s what you do. You pull away when things get emotionally tense. I suppose that’s why I can’t quite believe that we can have a relationship beyond this.” She studies me briefly before saying more.

“It is my job each day to sort the truth from lies. From defending my clients against misleading or under-sourced tidbits in the news to forcing the clients themselves to come clean, it’s a full-time job trying to identify what’s fiction and what’s reality. That’s not a skill I want to bring into my personal life. In fact, it’s a deal breaker. So, before I can set aside this fear, I need you to spell it out for me, Mateo, because if I’m some weird challenge to you, let’s not take this any farther.” She pauses, searching my eyes. “What do you want from me?”

I return my wine glass to the table and take hers as well. “I want a chance to help you see that in spite of whatever differences there are between us,” I reach for her hands and pull her into me, “our ages,” I search her face, my eyes entreating her to read between each and every line, “our backgrounds, our lifestyles,” I bend down to drop a light kiss on her collarbone, “you can trust me. So, new rule.” My voice is softer now as I move to her opposite shoulder, sliding her still-damp coils to the side to bring my nose to her neck. She gasps as I kiss down the column of her neck, finally bringing my lips to her ear. “Until I give you a reason otherwise, trust me.”

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I sit back, my body vibrating from the echoes of our closeness, my eyes daring her to refuse me. “Trust that what I say I mean. Trust that what you feel is true.”

“I want to,” she says, her voice a quiet plea to my heart. She doesn’t say all the things on her mind, but I see them, can feel them at the soul-deep frequency only we two seem to understand. I give a small nod, more a reaction to my own musings than her reply.

She closes her eyes and inhales deeply. “But I need you to be real with me, Mateo,” she whispers. “No more mysteries,” she pleads, her voice louder now. “If I say yes.”

I hold her stare as I take the leap into the unknown. “I have never wanted anything or anyone more. You occupy my mind even when my heart wants to resist it. Don’t you think that scares me, that *you* scare me, too?”

I bend down to kiss her cheek, not so much to tease or entice but to let her know what my words can’t yet convey and to give myself a chance to grab the courage I need to show her.

“But I’d rather risk getting hurt than not take this chance with you. So, maybe, we can figure this thing out,” my voice trails off as I try to read her thoughts and calm her apprehensions. “Together.”

When she finally offers a small nod, I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding and kiss the corner of her lush lips teasingly.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, dance with me,” I pull away from her and fish my phone from my jeans. “Got a speaker I can connect with?”

Alexa

My head works to catch up with my racing pulse as I consider the past few moments. As echoes of my fears continue bouncing all around me, challenging my good sense and pleading with my heart to slow down, I hear but will not heed them because playing it safe is no longer an option. The invisible tether that’s kept me emotionally distant has snapped, and I’m in emotional free fall.

I work to put these too-raw emotions in check as I lead Mateo across the room to the high-end sound system I’d installed after

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my divorce. I'd gone on a serious remodeling jag at the time, switching out perfectly fine appliances with commercial-grade replacements. Tearing down walls. Reconstructing rooms to reflect my tastes more accurately. The lively sounds of Selena's *Baila Esta Cumbia* yank me from my reverie and return me to the present. Mateo gives me a look that could bore a hole through lead as he walks towards me. The gray-green of his eyes, usually reminiscent of calm, shallow waters, has darkened to a turbulent, stormy sea, filling me with heat and desire. He reaches for my hand and slips his other arm around my waist.

"Show me your cumbia, Lexi."

He draws me closer to him and moves us into motion. I'm immediately struck by the command of his lead and the confidence in his moves, moves that seduce and cajole me closer to him in my mind, in my body, God, especially in my body, now on sensory overload thanks to our bumps, grinds, hip thrusts and flirty footwork. He's owning me and knows it as I melt in his arms while he swings us around the basement floor.

It's been ages since I've danced. It had never been Trent's thing because it was, in his words, one of the grandest wastes of time. But cutting dancing from my life had been like cutting one of the most important threads of my personality. Dance spoke for me at a time when I didn't know how to talk about the parts of my life that complicated the already confused mind of a pre-pubescent teenage girl with loads of daddy issues. From dealing with first crushes to processing the many colorful stories that I could tell about my childhood, dance had given me a way to show how I felt, allowing my body instead of my mouth to take the lead.

Before I know it, we've spent nearly an hour wrapped up in each other and by mutual consent, we take a break and retrieve our wine glasses. He deposits himself on the floor beside me, draws a knee to his chest and circles it with his right arm.

"So, was that fun?"

"It was heaven," I answer smiling broadly. "And you move like a pro. Thank you."

"My pleasure, love." He sidles closer to me, stroking my arm lightly. "Maybe all those dance classes as a kid paid off."

MASKED INTENT

“Seriously? You took lessons?”

“Seriously. It was a passion with my father, so each week, my brother and I took an hour-long class.” He takes a sip from his glass as whatever memories he’s attached to that part of his past run their due course. “You know,” he says after a few moments, the clouds now cleared from his eyes, “my father regarded dancing as the ultimate foreplay.”

“Did he, now?”

“Um hmm.” Mateo continues sipping his wine, watching closely, gauging my reaction. “It’s why he insisted we learn practically every dance ever made.”

I hold his stare, licking my lips in anticipation. “Seems you were a wonderful student. But tell me, was your dad right?”

Now, I know I’m playing with fire, but I absolutely could not resist doing it. I’m done for. I realized it the moment I heard the words fly from my mouth with a breathy, turned-on purr so foreign to my ears I wasn’t quite sure I wasn’t dreaming this. My cheeks grow warmer by the minute, alerting me that a crimson blush must be on full display across my cheeks, maybe even down my neck. I will myself to regain composure, but in truth, I’m more than ready to give up this fight. I feel desire churning deep inside my gut, the culmination of the sexual frustration that’s mounted from our all-too-brief intimate exchanges throughout the day.

“You tell me.”

Mateo

Without awaiting her response, I inch still closer to Alexa, causing her to swallow hard, her breathing noticeably labored. A nod is all she can manage, but her eyes are all heat and passion and longing as I lean forward to kiss her, chastely at first until the urgency that’s been growing all day breaks the dam. I’m not quite sure which of us surrenders first, but I’m going to say that it’s her judging from the way she pulls at my hair to bring me closer. I growl, reaching down to stroke her ass teasingly, sending jolts of heat through every inch of her body.

She entwines her fingers more fully through the mass of thick waves at the base of my neck and pulls me down to meet her kiss.

I break away to kiss the curve of her neck, nibbling and nudging her head to the side with my nose to grant me access. She smells of vanilla, spice, and jasmine, which may be the most intoxicating fragrance I've ever experienced. I'm not nearly close enough to her, so I pull her from the floor and move us to the sofa where I angle her diagonally between the arm of the sofa and a pillow.

Alexa

I'm melting with need for this man, who seems determined to kill me with wanting. My breathing is ragged and labored, and I think I might just die of longing. Determined to stoke the slow burn between us, he runs his hands along the dip in my back, leaving a trail of heat behind.

"No rush. *I need you to feel this. Feel us.*"

He slides to the floor and kneels to my feet where he plants a soft, wet kiss on my instep. He smiles at the wanton moan that escapes my lips, and I know I'm done for. The weight of raw anticipation welling inside of me is the sweetest, most maddening, most sensuous, most exciting sensation I've experienced – ever.

That is, until he grabs me around the hollows on either side of my Achilles tendons, applying and releasing pressure. He teases and squeezes his way up my foot before bringing it to his mouth. As he plants a slow, wet kiss along the side of the arch, our eyes lock and my breath grows impossibly shallow. I decide that this is a new brand of torture, killing me with wanting as he skims my arches with kisses that send wild, hot shimmers of desire straight to my core.

His eyes capture and hold me hostage to the moment as each touch scorches my senses, heightening the tender intimacy that radiates from my temples to my toes. But just as I relax into the mounting pleasure, high on the need welling inside of me, he breaks our contact, leaving me feeling bereft and needy. As I scramble to restore contact, needing to resume our nascent exploration, he rises on his knees, pushes me back on the sofa, and pulls me beneath him. Slowly, tortuously, he levers himself down, finds my lips, and devours me yet again. I'm lost in the possibilities our kissing unlocks as a million foreign sensations awaken my

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body from its long, self-imposed hibernation. I groan and I sigh as I throw my arms around his shoulders and trap his legs with mine, pulling him even closer as I wedge myself into the rippled terrain of his chest. His touch tempts me, enticing and entreating me to explore everything within this new horizon of passion and promise.

Our breathing syncs as our bodies meld, and I'm certain I might combust as his mouth moves from my lips to the column of my neck. But then I feel him reach down, tugging gently at the tail of my tank top to lift it higher, taking me even higher as he bows his head and begins worrying one nipple with his teeth through the slip of material masquerading as my bra. With each playful nip and tickle, I feel my core clench hard and deep, driving me rhythmically towards ecstasy. Realizing I'm on the brink of insanity with this maddening need for him, he reaches down between my legs, stroking and rubbing me through my jeans with steady, evermore insistent pressure. I feel his growing impatience as he unzips my jeans and snakes a hand inside. He hisses in a breath when he discovers I'm bare beneath the denim.

"Shit, you're commando," he rasps into my ear.

"Most of the time," I pant as my now-drenched sex rises to meet his busy finger, sparking a wave of pulses as he rims my aching slit.

"Bad girl," he growls. My legs fall open to accommodate his exploration, and I bite my quivering lip as Mateo's finger pushes inside of me with slow, methodical pulses. His groans deepen when he discovers the truth of my longing, his eyes remaining locked with mine, daring me to look away as one finger then another tease at the wetness between my legs. I whimper as his long, nimble finger shoves deeper inside, stroking me masterfully, and my core responds eagerly to his ministrations. He shifts his wrist slightly to find the nub of my clitoris hard and ready, needing his touch.

"Oh, God," I purr faintly above a whisper. My back arches as he picks up his pace and stretches me wider, inserting another finger. I tighten against the increased pressure almost immediately, waves of pleasure rippling through me with growing urgency and

intensity. He bends to kiss my neck, teasing and tickling his way along the sensitive flesh behind my ear. At the same time, he snakes his left hand around my waist to bring me closer and tighten the grip that keeps me in place. His sounds alone threaten to unravel me as I clamp down still tighter on his fingers. I'm completely captivated by this bliss, mewling softly and hanging on the edge while I grasp his forearm with one hand and white-knuckle the seat cushion with the other. I throw back my head, my mouth opened slightly as I pant in rhythm to my mounting arousal. I won't last much longer, and he knows it.

I try to control the urge to scream as he increases the pressure, goading me on, his fingers working deftly to find my trigger and make me explode. On his command, my body erupts into a heightening, pulsing cadence, quivering, and quaking at this pleasure. Reading his timing perfectly, Mateo brings his mouth down over mine to catch the primal scream that tries to escape my throat. His breathing is erratic, too, as he pulls me into his body. My climax seems to go on endlessly, the aftershocks wracking my body as I return to Earth from the ultimate high. Slowly, methodically, he retrieves his hand, holding eye contact with me as he sucks the evidence of my satisfaction from his fingers like he's savoring a fine delicacy.

"Come here," he says as he draws my limp body into an embrace. We cling to each other, neither of us wanting to break the depth of our connection.

Mateo

I'm mentally hi-fiving myself for not exploding in my pants after that. The way Alexa surrenders to the hunger we've kept carefully locked away is heady, teasing my own feral need to possess and caress every inch of her – body and soul. I lock her tight against me because I'm in complete awe of this way she makes me feel.

But I can't let myself have her, I can't let us take this any farther, unless I know for certain where we stand. I close my eyes and force myself to slow us down because I know a taste of her would never be enough. I need to savor and devour her from the inside

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out. I could do something cliché like think of baseball or a naked aunt. But I instead meet my dilemma head on – at least for now. I pull back to watch her, and it seems to be working until I find myself caught up in those beautiful golden eyes that glow even brighter when she's aroused. I pet her shoulders reverently, gentling my touch until it fades from her skin. I swallow and bend to drop a quick kiss on her lips.

“Maybe we should slow down, Lex,” I whisper groan, hating myself for stopping but knowing this is the right thing. I reach for her hand and kiss it. “I’m not sure I thought this when we first met, but I’m glad we navigated our attraction while we got to know each other. We worked around it, but that doesn’t mean it died down or is any less intense. Right now, stopping this from going further is killing me. But I can’t have you thinking that everything has been about fucking you. It hasn’t. It’s still not.”

She nods and cups her hands around my cheeks. “I know that,” she whispers, her eyes wild and unfocused, and I’m not sure how long I can hold on to my resolve. But that decision is ripped from me as a loud crash outside effectively snaps the sex-charged restraints holding us in suspension. Her attention darts to the patio doors as she hastily pulls down her shirt and peels away from me to run over and have a closer look at what’s happened. I follow closely behind her but stop short at the sight of the downed tree across her patio. The good news is that it cleared her house. It looks like a few of her beautiful rose bushes took the bulk of the hit, though. I imagine it’s instinct or adrenaline that makes her try to take off toward the wreckage. I catch her arm before she goes barreling into the torrents of rain that continue to pour from the sky.

“Sweetheart,” I say quietly but urgently, “no.” After a tense few moments, her body sags back into mine, and I wrap her up gently. “We’ll wait until the rain ends. Then we can go see what happened outside.”

She sighs and settles more deeply into my grasp. “What do we do in the meantime?”

I laugh and thank her silently for the redirect. “Maybe we can find a game to play.”

Chapter 11

Sunday, September 8
Alexa

By mutual consent, Mateo and I managed to keep our hands to ourselves (mostly anyway) for the rest of last night. It was late when the storms finally passed, so Luke and my boys stayed put for the evening. True to their adventurous selves, they'll try their hike once more and head back to me later this afternoon. That leaves us a few hours here alone.

Thanks to our mini movie marathon and an apparently bottomless wine glass, I'm not quite as alert as I'd like this morning. Then again, it's barely 8 a.m. I snuggle under the covers and into the new realities that the weekend has revealed. I've never felt anything like last night. Though we managed to stop short of giving all the way in to our insane chemistry, the intimacy between us is undeniable and inescapable. I'm not sure what it means for us, though. Our impromptu weekend together will near its end, and as much as I don't want to admit it because it makes me feel silly, I'll be sad when he leaves.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Mateo tightens his grip around my waist and nuzzles his head into my shoulder. I try to settle back

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to sleep as these pent-up feelings and hopeful impressions collide in my brain. I quickly realize this is of no use, so I decide to get up. Apparently, Mateo has other ideas, groaning and tightening his grip even more, causing me to go completely lax, literally caught in his thrall. He runs his lips gently, reverently along the column of my neck, and I go mad with wanting. I try turning around to face him, but again he locks me in place.

“No, you’re warm. And soft. Stay. Please.”

I sigh and let the comfort of his arms lull me back to unconsciousness.

It’s around 11:30 when we’re finally up. I’ve whipped up a quick brunch, and we decide to take advantage of the beautifully sunny late morning by enjoying our meal on my kitchen balcony. A comfortable silence descends around us as we exchange occasional glances, each of us allowing our minds to wander, it seems. At a point, I look to him, feeling his gaze on me for longer than necessary. Our eyes lock as a flood of reality descends. Or maybe not.

“I’m considering kidnapping you. Think I could get away with it?”

That makes me smile. “Seriously, Da Rocha?”

My eyes soften as he gives me a shy smile that turns me to goo. “Yes, Lexi. Seriously,” he says quietly. He returns his plate to the table and walks the few steps to kneel in front of me. “So how are we going to do this, love?”

“Do what?” I ask, not entirely sure of what he means.

“Keep exploring where this is heading.”

I force myself not to look away from his intense stare. I don’t really need the clarification I’m about to ask for, but I want it so I can relax in the confidence that we’re on the same page.

“What are you asking me, Mateo?”

“I want more times like yesterday. I want us to keep growing towards being together.” He rakes me with his eyes and swallows hard. “I don’t always want to feel like I have to beat at the doors of your heart for you to let me in.”

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I may have opened my mind to the idea of being with Mateo, but my heart needs to know more. I let his words wash over me, let them sink in and take root. I'm wholly compelled to give in to what I feel even though we still have some work to do.

"How's that make us different than we were the day before yesterday, Mateo?"

He moves to stand, grabs me by my biceps and pulls me up and into him before I can finish what I need to say.

"I don't want to crowd you or make your life any more complicated than it already is. But we both know that yesterday, this weekend, changes everything, Lexi. First, let's agree on that."

I nod but don't immediately respond, needing to hear more. He bends and kisses me softly behind my right ear, groaning in frustration before pulling away, grabbing my shoulders, and giving them a quick squeeze.

"So, here's the thing," he begins, searching my eyes and pleading with his own, "for the past few minutes, I've been thinking about leaving you and heading home. The idea puts me somewhere between rage and depression. So, I'm asking myself how to steal as much of your time as you'll allow without scaring you away by making you feel like I'm moving too fast."

This is one of the biggest reasons I'd resisted Mateo at first. I'd warned him that being involved with me would be a package deal. So, I'll need to navigate this discussion carefully so I can be sure we're on the same page.

"My life has lots of moving parts, I know," I begin, my tone of voice suggesting a level of calm that I don't necessarily feel. "I honestly don't know what it might take to make sure everything balances." I take a deep breath before putting an exclamation point behind my concerns. "I need to know that you can be patient with me if that doesn't happen all at once."

"You know I can and will, and I put no pressures on you at all, Alexa," he answers, searching my face.

I'm not certain what he seeks, so maybe we aren't on the same page. He looks away from me for a moment, clearly choosing his next words. I can't breathe or perhaps don't breathe until his attention is on me once more.

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“I know that your plate is full.” He pulls me all the way in for a hug before speaking softly in my ear. “I also know that I want more – not less – of you, Lexi. I’m not looking to label us. We can go slow. But I want us to keep moving forward. No more games, love.”

I chuckle a little at that. “Really? No more games, Mateo?” I ask softly, earning me a quick swat on the ass and a cheesy grin.

“Not those games, love, because my games are fun.” He sobers and shakes his head, clearly back on whatever messaging he needs me to hear. “You know what I mean. Let’s see where this goes. See where we go together.”

I chew on my lower lip as my libido pushes me to fall in headlong and my heart urges its usual cautions. I’ll need to align the two later but for now simply give him my assent with a quick nod and the smile only he can conjure.

“I don’t have answers either. But we want the same thing.”

“Good. So, we’ll find them. Together.”

Thursday, September 12

Alexa

Over the next few days, Mateo makes good on his promise to go all full-court press with our relationship. On Monday, he has lunch delivered to my office. When I mentioned I’d have to work late on Tuesday and Wednesday to prepare Hedge for an ill-advised editorial board meeting he insisted on taking with the *Post* in a couple of weeks, Mateo insisted I let him pick up the tab for town car service so I wouldn’t have to worry about driving to and from work after many frustrating hours of dealing with my client’s insolence and arrogance. It’s now Thursday, and I was greeted this morning with a surprise delivery of an assortment of bagels, juices, and coffee for the family shortly after I returned from my run. His attention has been heady, fueling my excitement and tamping down my trepidation about taking this step with him, about redefining this intriguing relationship. I don’t know if that was his intent, but if so, I applaud his efforts. He’s good.

“Knock, knock. Got a few minutes for an old man?”

I look up to meet Sam Stone's inquisitive stare as he stands in my office doorway.

"Just," I say, motioning for him to come in. "I've got that group mega meet with Hedge."

These impromptu visits from Sam were becoming quite common, which puts me on notice. He closes and locks the door behind him, and I motion him to my desk as I gather the updates that Trey's been pulling together for me all day.

"As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I'd planned to nominate you to join the executive committee at the end of this month. But that timeline's been accelerated, Lexi."

"Ok. Tell me why."

I gnash my teeth because Sam's demeanor says more than his words need to; he's about to knock me sideways with something I don't want or am not ready to hear and handle.

"I'll be moving that plan up to our next meeting, which is later this afternoon."

I narrow my eyes and shake my head. "What does that mean exactly? And have you ever heard of advanced notice?"

He smiles the smile that most of the world sees as self-deprecating. I, however, know this smile as the one he wears when he's trying to work people, in this case, me, and that gets my back up.

"For now," he says, "I need you aware and on your toes. And think about taking a lead role in shaping this firm's future sooner than later."

"Look, Sam," I begin cautiously as I realize he's given me little more than scraps, "I'm not sure I want that. Not now."

A knock at my still-locked door stills my thoughts. I excuse myself and consider my gut reaction to this news as I walk the few steps to answer. I didn't exactly see this coming and definitely not this soon, so I need to pull back and assess. As I open the door, my attention is stolen completely by the messenger standing there with the most exquisite vase of flowers I've ever seen.

"Ms. Winston? These are for you."

I take the offering reflexively, stunned into silence at the sight before me. A supersized bouquet of snowball shaped flowers,

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roses, and camellias, I think, some with blushing pink centers, is foisted into my hands. I accept the vase and ask the beaming girl to wait for a moment as I walk over to my desk, deposit the gift, then grab my purse from the bottom drawer to swipe a few dollars for a tip. She objects when she realizes my plan.

“Oh. No. My tip has already been paid but thank you just the same.”

She says goodbye and turns on her heel before I can collect my scattered brain cells and ask her who’d paid her. My shock apparent, I stand beside the vase, mesmerized by the gorgeous blooms. Of course, I know that this is Mateo’s work. I also know he’s spoiled me well beyond rotten these past days. My smile grows as I reach for the card nestled amongst the beauty.

Mateo: I’ve missed you this week. Can I see you tonight? Can I have you this weekend?

The smile that splits my face and warms my cheeks must light the entire room as I look up to find Sam studying me with deliberation. I’d nearly forgotten that I need to finish this mess with him, so I spin on my heel to place the card on my desk only to find Sam approaching from behind when I turn around again. From the gleam in his eyes, I know he’s ready to pepper me with questions – and not ones about this firm or Sydell. So, I immediately throw up my shields.

He points to the vase as one corner of his mouth quirks up into a crooked grin. “Now let’s see. Did I miss some special occasion?” He taps the side of his head for effect as he gestures to the lovely, fragrant blooms. “I know it’s not your birthday. And we won’t be saying goodbye to the Shulman case for a few weeks yet, so those can’t be from him,” he says, referring to one of our lower-profile clients. “Am I missing something, Lexi?”

“No, not at all, Sam. You can’t miss what you don’t know about.”

I keep my smile as innocent as I can even though I know I’ve just inched under his skin with my reply. I know he wasn’t expecting that answer, but I don’t know whether that bothers him. He offers a nod and a tight smile before taking a step back.

“Well, then. Seems I’m not quite as present as I should be.”

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These are the moments between us that I hate most. The ones that feel awkward for no good reason. At least not a reason that gets discussed in a healthy way. Sam and I have shared more than a few of these encounters over the years. But until he's finally ready to take the first, most important step, I fear the irresistible force will forever stand in the way of the immovable object.

He clears his throat, preparing to move on until I wuss out and say, "Look, Sam, I've been sort of seeing someone and it's been super casual, so there's not much to share." I wave in the air vaguely as if to brush off any concerns or unusual vibes between us.

"But flowers like that aren't exactly the hallmark of a casual affair, my dear."

He lets his proclamation hang, his eyes trained tightly on me. I drop my eyes and I smile because that's what happens when I'm thinking of the man who twists my insides out. I sigh before trying to school my expression and put my truth into words.

"For lots of reasons, we've taken it slow, Sam. At this point, I'm not quite sure where we stand. If and when it, we, become a constant, I'll say more."

Sam reaches out to finger one of the delicate buds before returning his attention to me.

"That says a lot, Alexa." He brings his hand to my arm and offers a gentle squeeze. "I just want to see you happy. And it seems like you are – especially since you won't share anything with me."

The amusement he lets me see in his eyes likely hides a hurt and regret we both understand lurks deep inside in places no one can reach. But I force myself to ignore it because that ball is squarely in his court. Then, because I can't not say anything, I toss out the only peace offering I have.

"If it makes you feel any better, Sage and Lindy don't have many details either. Don't take it personally."

He shakes his head and clears his throat.

"Look, I get it. Now let's move on, shall we?"

I recognize the "Stonian" deflection and gratefully retrain my focus to more pressing matters at hand. He asks me to clear my schedule to attend the executive committee meeting later this

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afternoon, and I grudgingly agree. Satisfied, he claps and rubs his hands together and gives me a quick nod of the head as he turns to leave. A quick check of the clock alerts me that I need to put all else aside and prepare myself for whatever may come over the next many hours.

“And Lexi, I may be short on details, but I’m long on instinct,” Sam adds, his smile kind and warm. “It’s ok to fall in love again.”

He winks before disappearing through the door, leaving me precious little time to gather my composure, my thoughts, and my game face. After one last silent curse on Sam and his knack for having inconvenient timing, I sigh but decide to put first things first. I spot my phone, find Mateo’s number, and call but it goes to voice mail. A brief check of the clock mocks me as I realize I need to dig into my meeting prep, so I settle for a text.

Me: What a lovely surprise! Thank you so much for the flowers. But I could have said that to you if you’d answered your phone.

I feel rather giddy when I see the response bubbles pulsing, and I laugh at myself. His reply quickly follows.

Mateo: Hey, love. Getting ready to begin a class. Thank me when you see me tonight.

I groan at his response, knowing I’ll need to beg off now that Sam has roped me into this meeting.

Me: I wish I could. I’ve been called to a meeting and don’t know how long it will take. Tomorrow?

Mateo: Don’t want to wait that long. ;-)

Me: Me either. But ... ???

Mateo: No but. Meet me for drinks whenever you’re done. Please.

I can’t say no, and so after ensuring Luke will be at home to lord over the boys so they don’t burn down the house while I’m away, we make plans to meet at a bar near his campus around 7:30 this evening. The remainder of my day consumes most of my energies, so I have precious little time to indulge any thoughts of the man or what may lie ahead for us.



After yet another contentious session with Hedge, I work my way around the halls to S|F|S's executive committee meeting. As the newest, well, soon-to-be newest member of the group, I'm content to be present without making my presence known. That won't be the case, though. From the moment I enter the swank conference room, the tension in the place races towards me, bouncing and vacillating on the air. Sydell and Jackson Liddle, our CFO, sit huddled together at the sprawling rectangular table, but they manage to take a break from their commiseration to spare me a glance that's part disdain and part warning. I carefully blank my face of expression as I continue to assess the room. Off next to the break table stands Sam, who's fiddling with his phone as Davis Fischer chatters away, trying without success to claim Sam's full attention. The remaining committee members form a line to grab refreshments, but if the mood in this room is any indication, I'm not sure I have much of an appetite. I decide instead to take a seat and settle in.

As I drop into my chair, I catch Sam's eye. He smiles and waves off Davis as he heads my way. Davis follows Sam's gaze and narrows his eyes just enough to be noticeable when he reaches me. Once Sam is seated beside me, he reaches for the agenda and points to two items.

"Two things: have a look at the agenda. The second to the last item is likely to catch you off guard. It has something to do with a new venture Hedge is launching."

The question in my eyes clear, I try to probe for more. "Why's this important?"

"Not sure, but I know it's questionable. So, heads up."

I frown because I hate surprises like this. They never end well, and if I'm only now hearing of it, odds are solid it bears Sydell's imprint.

"And the second item?" I ask, needing to deflect any more surprises or gotchas.

He winks and gives a curt nod. "It's the best item on the list for today. Just be prepared when I open discussion."

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“On what?” I ask, but I know the answer already. He’s making his move to oust Sydell, which explains why Davis is in the room and why Dick will join by phone. According to Sam, they never attend these meetings unless they’re making big, expensive decisions. Without answering my question, he pats my hand and pushes his chair back from the table. Before I can gather my thoughts, he turns for the door and leaves the room, leaving me to question the wisdom of even considering this.

My mind hangs onto the possibilities as we slog through the first items on the agenda. I should probably be more invested in the proposed rent increase. It’s also a big deal that one of our best lobbyists, Dean Weston, is walking a slippery slope with his new, leggy intern. But I can’t connect and can’t really be bothered to care because I know this is about to go left. In sitting with me before the meeting, Sam had done what he came to do. We’d be talking about his deliberate manipulation of the time and circumstances later. For now, I’m on high alert. Sydell and Jackson are quite obviously a voting bloc, the pair thinking in unison and syncing their usually negative feedback on each and every issue. Already, I’ve grown weary of hearing what I’m sure they think passes for genteel discourse. What I hear from them more readily brings to mind a high school production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Sydell’s coquettish demeanor is an act designed to cajole and charm, but it really doesn’t work for her. I wonder vaguely if she’s aware of that when I note a very definite character shift as we reach the first item on Sam’s oh-shit list.

“Now, the next item is a huge get for us, so I hope you’ll see the wisdom in moving quickly to approve this very, very significant client win for our firm.”

Sydell scans the eyes in the room, her own dancing with glee and challenge as she prepares to launch whatever scat bomb she thinks she’s about to drop.

“Our very good client, HedgeCo, is entering into a joint venture with Warren Cave Laboratories to explore energy efficiency. The new company will be called SelmaTec, and Hedge wants us to rep the new firm in addition to his own. Isn’t that just the best news?”

Not. At. All.

Some discussion follows as the group probes for any risks in the representation. I hang back, the words Warren Cave whirring through my head and screaming, “Danger, Alexa Winston! Danger!” This is too much of a coincidence, and I know Sam must have been privy. Why he wouldn’t share this highly sensitive information with me makes no sense.

“Sydell, can you tell us about principals in the new entity so we can begin our vetting?” Sam asks in what I can only guess is his attempt at drawing out her details.

Her smile cools at Sam’s query. He’s been relatively quiet all meeting – suspiciously so – but I’m not sure who else may have noticed. Shoulders thrown back, eyes slightly narrowed, Sydell’s irritation is evident though I’m sure that, as per usual, she’s completely clueless to it all.

“Well now, Samson, I’m sure that’s the way you’ve always done things. But in this case, there’s truly no need.”

“And that’s where you’re completely wrong, Sydell,” Sam interjects. “I don’t care if you’ve convinced St. Patrick and the Easter Bunny to hire us. Unless you work inside of this group to secure the management support that you need, it’s not happening. There may be issues that prevent us from representation or would warn us against taking this on. We may be conflicted out because we represent a competing client.” He pauses, looking to me before continuing. “One or more of our team members could have significant conflicts that would prevent us from full engagement. By vetting all potential work – especially when it comes to clients like HedgeCo – we protect our people, our existing clients, and our reputation. Or don’t you understand this to be your role as managing director of this firm?”

She huffs and shakes her head. “That is completely unfair and unwarranted. But not unexpected, Samson. Very well, then. Hedge has scored big. His partners are well-respected, world renowned scientists, so I think it’s safe to say *you’ve* likely never heard of them. But since you’re so very insistent, the principals in the entity are Drs. Richard Warren and Trent Caverton.”

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Her mistake is that she takes time to gloat. I glance at Sam, whose face rests impassively. But I can see that glint of anticipation he gets in his eyes before a good dress down, so I figure I better grab the floor while I can before he goes all in on her.

“Dick Warren and Trent Caverton founded Warren Cave about 10 years ago, Sydell,” I state as dispassionately as possible. “In that time, they’ve been the subject of endless rumors, investigations, and for a time, had to shut down when their labs were seized by government regulators. You’d do well to vet that organization before committing the firm to working with them.”

Sydell shakes her head, determined to shut me down. “Please don’t start with all that reporter’s nonsense, Alexa. I don’t care what you think you know. They’re a solid and reputable outfit.”

I hold up my hand to halt whatever dismissal she thinks she’s about to send my way and pin her with a stare that brooks no argument.

“Sydell,” I begin, straining to keep my voice even, “knowledge is power – especially if you’re thinking that I take lead on this. I don’t believe that anyone at this table would want me shaping image and policy around anything having to do with my ex-husband or his business interests.” I decide to reveal it before it can be asked. “Trent Caverton and I were married for 15 years. No, I’m not a bitter ex. And we have no relationship these days, which is more than fine. My concern is ideological. My concern is reputational. I’m glad to explain more if and when it becomes necessary. But I advise against taking this on.”

Sydell eyes Jackson, very obviously her sympathizer, who offers her a nod and a wink so slight it would be missed without looking closely. “So, what, exactly, are you saying, Alexa? Could it simply be that someone else should handle this account? I think you simply expect to cherry pick the clients you work with while casting off those who somehow don’t align with your worldview.”

I eye the jerk across the table with cool disinterest, tilt my head, and pull my lips into a small smile that I never allow to reach my eyes.

“I’m sorry you have such low regard for me. It’s unfortunate since we’ve never, *ever* worked together.” I open my hands as if to ask, “what the fuck?” but I keep my expression serene. “This is a significant matter, Jackson. You should know an organization’s history before taking them on as clients. Warren Cave has been mired in ethical challenges to its work. There are more than a few questions, too, about the lab’s solvency. There’s no end to the rumors circulating about its funding since the government launched an investigation into the place. I suggest you do the research before jumping on this bandwagon. It would be foolhardy to ignore any of this. Once you know more about the issues, if you still decide to take on this work, then fine. But I won’t involve myself. He’s my ex-husband, and our working together is a headline in the making. No thank you.”

Sydell slings a sharp, disingenuous smile my way, claps her hands, and rubs them together like a fly sizing up the trash. “And we’ll be certain to take that under advisement. Now, I’d like to talk about on-boarding dates and assemble a team.”

“Not so fast, Sydell.” Sam clears his throat and scans the table. “The fact that you would be so quick and careless to dismiss even a single concern raised at this table is not a small matter. It’s just one more behavior that makes me question whether you’re the right person to guide this firm.”

She stares at him incredulously. “What are you talking about, Sam? Just because you don’t agree—”

“Sydell, I’m well beyond disagreement. As you’ve so expertly demonstrated here today, we need to discuss the firm’s future and whether it’s safe under your leadership. With that in mind, I move that we table the SelmaTec discussion to next week and proceed to the last piece of business on today’s agenda. You’ve provided the perfect preamble to this, so thank you, Sydell.”

“Not so fast—,” Sydell jumps in right about the time Dick says, “I second that.”

With the motion carried and Sydell effectively silenced, Sam uses the next several minutes to regale the group on the founding partners’ vision for the future and how Sydell’s leadership has been one big hit job on said vision.

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“For those reasons and more,” he says in summation, “I move that we find new leadership effective immediately.”

“Now you wait one minute,” Sydell erupts, pushing to her feet.

“No,” Sam returns, his voice calm but his face stern, his shoulders tight. “You’ll have time to appeal if you chose to do so. But right now? Once again, I move that we find new leadership effective immediately.”

Silence blankets the room for long moments, then Davis replies, “Second.”

Sydell’s head whips around to her uncle, hurt evident in her muddy brown irises. Clearly, she wasn’t expecting to lose his favor, so perhaps that’s what halts her reply. I can’t know. Seemingly oblivious to the visual standoff, Sam completes the motion, and the group agrees to convene again within the week to explore the matter further. As soon as the meeting adjourns, Sydell flies from the room, and Sam asks me to stay behind.

Chapter 12

Friday, September 13
Alexa

I rouse more quickly than is normal for me when my alarm clock sounds at precisely 5:30 a.m. It typically takes a couple of smacks of the snooze touch pad before I grudgingly begin my day an average of 18 minutes later. But this morning was a different story. Where fatigue and dread once fought for mental dominance, excitement is all I find as I greet this new day.

Because we only had a brief time together last evening, Mateo decreed that we'd play hooky after I handle a few essentials in the office. Well, more accurately, he convinced *me* to play hooky. Today is Friday, a class-free day for the good professor. It took a bit more convincing for him to talk me into an entire weekend away with him, and after what felt like strategic business negotiations, I relented. But first things first.

Thanks to Sam's executive team stunt last evening, I need to get myself into the office sooner than later today. Now that I'm the firm's interim managing director, I'll have to figure out how to navigate around the field of landmines and hidden grenades sure to be tucked away in the mess Sydell created during her tenure at

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the helm of S|F|S. But before I can even begin to dig through any of that, I need to understand Dick Warren's sudden reappearance and what it might mean. I spend the next hour trying to fit together the scattered, odd-shaped pieces of this puzzle. I don't want to obsess. But I don't want to overlook any clues either. No matter how many ways I turn it over, the Hedge-Warren alliance spells trouble.

Dick Warren and my ex banded together to build technology with "the power to define – maybe even correct – the course of mankind." Trent had uttered his lofty words so often they'd burned themselves into my brain. He'd been driven to transform science fiction into science fact, but over the years, that drive had become a Frankensteinian obsession, his ultimate religion, and he worshipped it accordingly. In short order, he'd chosen his work, his research, his need to be larger than life over being a part of our family.

To be completely fair, he'd done what he set out to do. Trent and his research team successfully designed and engineered the prototype for an automaton powered by adaptive artificial intelligence. The longer they performed functions, the better they learned not only how to do the job right, but how to work more efficiently as well. The US government quickly signed on to test the prototypes, but access to the innovations was kept under extremely close hold, making the technology inaccessible to all except those with the power or pockets to lobby their way to approval. I remember those early days after Warren Cave inked its first government contract. Soon after, scores of pilot programs spawned thanks to suspiciously short procurement cycles, all of which were managed under the restrictive thumb of career government watchdogs trying to determine how to extract profit. Even as the scientific community celebrated him, and despite the various trappings which put his success on clear and open display, Trent still wasn't satisfied. He often complained of his lack of involvement in the many programs, saying how beneficial he could be in helping integrate the tech into everyday use. I can't be certain because he never discussed such things with me, but I think Trent's refusal to accept that he'd been excluded from the

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integration efforts scorched his ego and led to the program's ultimate demise.

Shortly afterward, he and Warren parted ways, but the reasons why remain a mystery, much like Warren himself. In the 15 years I spent with Trent, my contact with the man had been limited to a few brusque exchanges on the phone and a hand-scribbled note here and there. Famously a recluse, Warren rarely walked amongst the rest of us. What I knew of the man I'd gleaned from the many threads and storylines Trent enjoyed weaving into daily conversation. I knew that Warren was the charisma and personality half of the duo and that he'd been the catalyst for adapting engineered intelligence for use in certain climate-change management applications. His instincts hit the target, and the laboratory grabbed attention from the government.

I shoot a text to Sage so I can pick his brain about all this, maybe coax him to share one of his sources who can help me run down answers and prepare for what's to come. I have no illusions that I'll learn anything good. And I'll need to prepare for that day...one day.

What needs my tight focus now are the optics of this time I'll spend with Mateo. At 15, Tristan is certainly old enough and responsible enough to watch his brothers. But who will care for the children is the easy side of this angst. I find I'm conflicted in my decision to so openly plan not to come home this weekend. But these children, it seems, are far more modern and evolutionary in their thinking than I am. Like so many women with children, I've allowed my mom-ness to overtake the basic needs and wants of the woman I remain inside. Then, too, my boys have likely heard a tale or two from their friends whose parents are divorced. Though dating may be a new frontier for me, it's apparently something that my children felt was long overdue and, as a result, is pretty much a non-issue.

"Oh, hey. Turn up, woman! You look hot ... for a mom," Tristan says as he appears in the doorway of my bedroom. "What time are you leaving?"

"Dude, that's just creepy. I'm pretty sure you can't tell your mom she looks hot. That's just wrong," Trace interjects from

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behind, shaking his head in mock disgust. He shoots me the same quizzical look Tristan flashed just moments ago. No wonder they'd been pegged for twins when they were younger, despite being 23 months apart and, at least in my eyes, were clearly distinguishable.

"I said for a mom, you loser. Shut the eff up."

I laugh and point them away from my door. Deciding what to wear had been a significantly difficult task given the fact that my current wardrobe swung towards one of two extremes: workplace chic or suburban-mom shabby-casual. After much searching and near-frustration, I discovered a forgotten pair of acid washed, low-rise, hip-hugging jeans that fit lovingly and paired them with a fitted orange tie-dyed t-shirt with three-quarter sleeves and a v-back that fastened up from the waist to a point just below mid-back. For my office appearance this morning, I'll throw on a blazer and heels to put a more professional spin on my garb. And, as ever, my hair remains the wild card. Emphasis on wild. Normally, I'm not one to fuss about the chaotic waves and ringlets that now extend well past my shoulders. My natural hair had been a primary beneficiary in my divorce now that I no longer forced my mane into chemically induced submission to please Trent, who'd railed against my allowing my hair to give away the truth of my multiracial ethnicity. I consider this and him with disdain as I absently, anxiously, run my flat iron through the headstrong tresses, lightly taming the ridiculously thick mass just enough to subdue it into a wavy top knot accented by deep brown and dark blonde tendrils. I'll take the young one's reactions as a thumbs up for my efforts.

"Look, let's go over some basic rules for the evening."

Today was a half school day, so my brood would be home and settled much earlier than was typical for a Friday afternoon. Lindy would arrive by 3, and Luke, my ever-present, live-in babysitter, had agreed to set up his planned GamesFest to keep my children occupied. Also on deck for the rest of the day and into the night: a make-your-own pizza session and screenings of as many Marvel Comics Universe movies as the boys can stand or stay awake for.

I complete my run down of dos and don'ts to my so-over-it young men, who telegraph their disinterest with bored faces and rolling eyes. I can't be mad at them, though. They're good, easy-going, and are probably looking forward to being shed of my over-protective covering for a few days.

"So, any questions?" I ask as I bring my fire-side chat to an end.

"Only one," Tristan says. "When do we get to meet him?"

"Yeah," Trace echoes, flashing a smile that reveals gorgeous dimples. "We need to brand him with our seal of approval before this gets too far out of hand, mom."

I laugh as they maintain straight faces. Ever righteous in their quest to keep me safe from harm, I realize they're quite serious and need to know that I know that.

"Give it some time, you two. You'll have ample chance to weigh in when the time comes. Any objections?"

The boys smile, knowing they'd struck a nerve. Seemingly satisfied by my reply, they exchange a pound and smug, satisfied nods as they say their goodbyes and race each other to the kitchen for a quick bite before school.

"Stay out of trouble, you two, and call whenever you need to."

I shout the last but fear it went unheard as the scuffle of feet and muffled hoots fades into the distance. I shift my focus to the overnight bag across the room and finish packing my necessities. Mateo had been vague when I asked what I should bring, and I'm finding I quite enjoy this air of mystery and element of surprise he seems to like to create. Going with the flow is certainly a new outlook for me, but for him, I'll explore it.

Mateo

Hot needles from the shower head prick my skin as I run over my plans one last time to make sure everything is set for the afternoon and evening ahead. I have dinner planned and plenty of wine chilling, and once Alexa arrives, I want her relaxed.

I'd hoped to have the entire day to make sure that everything was perfect, but that wasn't to be. It's Friday, a day I hold as sacred and free from the rush and obligation of classes. But when the department chair calls a meeting, and the department chair is your

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uncle, you drop all else and see what the hell is up his ass to need to bring us together on the rightful start of the weekend. I still can't be made to care about endowments and boards of visitors. I care even less about his ambitions to be the university's next provost and his belief that his success in that endeavor relies on ensuring his full control over his department and its professors – particularly me. What does matter is that his pop-up meeting caused me to reroute my plans a bit. But I think I've done the best I can with the cards I've been dealt.

I reach for my shampoo, a special blend from my mother, and I pour an ample amount into my hand to wash away the hour I spent sparring at the gym with Becket to let off some steam. I massage the sudsless cleanser through my sweat-slicked strands quickly and efficiently and rinse, but even this doesn't relax me as I'd hoped. My anxiety is a combination of anticipation and sexual frustration. So, I decide it's time to take the matter in hand. In all truth, I've been semi hard all day thinking about where tonight could take us. I've been meticulous in resisting the pull between us for a few reasons. I needed her totally convinced that I wanted more than sex from her, but more than that, I've suspected that once we take that step, it'll unleash an unquenchable and feral need that neither us of seemed capable of handling before now. Even now, my caution lingers as these thoughts of her play clearly in my head. I grip my shaft more tightly now, stroking urgently as I find the perfect rhythm. I immediately relax into the pleasure sensations that race from my tip to my balls, and it's clear I won't be at this for long. My dick is thick and painfully hard as thoughts that I've kept in check for months come into clear view. Alexa riding me, my hands gripping her trim waist as she finds her pleasure. Me pumping every inch of myself into her with hard, desperate thrusts. Spilling myself all over her and doing it over and over again. I close my eyes against the thoughts as my breathing picks up and the tingles in my spine warn me that release is close. I throw my head back and groan as I feel a burst of pre-cum spill from me. I speed up the pace of my strokes as I race towards my finish. Time hangs for a moment as the first waves of my climax squirt forcefully, coating my stomach and shower wall while the

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light behind my eyes flashes an array of colors. As I work out my climax, the various colors explode and shift like something from a hidden spectral prism. Perhaps this is what it's like to see life through the eyes of the mantis shrimp. I shake my head at the random thought as I come down from my peak and rinse away the evidence of the past few minutes.

Now relaxed, loose, and focused, I shut off the taps and step out of the shower. I grab a towel from the wall rack to wrap around my waist and one to blot some of the water from my hair. I flip the switch to turn on the exhaust fan and within a few moments, the mirror begins to clear of steam and my image comes into focus. From my earliest memories, I recall my mother working overtime to normalize self-care, much to my father's dismay. While he feared her lessons would somehow soften me or mute my masculinity (though he expressed these fears in much angrier, nastier terms), she insisted that caring for one's personal appearance was as much a life lesson for success as learning to balance a checkbook. I consider this as I reach for my blow dryer. I don't make a fuss with most things, but I make the exception when it comes to my hair. That's not surprising considering that my mother has made her living as a hair stylist for years. After she left my father, she built quite a name and solid business for herself, charging way too much to create bespoke hair styles for people with money to burn. Whenever she got the chance, Isabella ran a fashion masterclass, imprinting her sense of style and attention to personal detail on my brain. These are some of my best memories. But unlike what my father thought, they weren't merely sessions in vanity. This was the time and space that we shared together when my mom was my captive audience and the standard bearer of my hopes, my hurts, and my dreams. Through adult eyes, I believe she was intentional in structuring every moment we spent together, all a part of a deliberate grand plan to craft for me a sense of normalcy and decency to sustain me once she was able to leave our home. She must have known on some level that in order to gain her freedom, she'd have to leave me behind. I never resented her for valuing and knowing herself in this way because despite what being married to my father cost her, she poured her all into

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laying the foundation that ultimately would overwrite my father's attempts to mold me in his image.

I put away thoughts of my mother and finish drying my hair. I head to my closet, find jeans and a navy-blue Henley, and head to my kitchen where I've had scallops and shrimp marinating for a couple of hours. I'll be attempting risotto, following a recipe I found on YouTube. I'm not the worst cook, but it's not something I've spent lots of time perfecting. That's why cooking for Alexa may not have been the best thought-out plan, but I don't want pretense or the distraction of restaurants and people to take our focus off each other this evening. But the jury is definitely out until I see how this will end up. I've watched this risotto video a few times now, and I wasn't counting on having to stir this shit until a new world is conceived. But it's too late to change course, so I'll just have to hope for the best. Hell, cooking felt like a good idea at the time.

"Shit," I mutter as these thoughts threaten to knock me back off-balance. I stalk over to the bar, pour myself a shot of Jameson, and head out to my terrace. It's just a bit past 2 but fuck it. As I stare out at the C&O Canal watching bikers and joggers move with purpose along the path, I down the shot quickly, letting the buzz blanket my busy mind, soothing the frenzy and easing my angst. I like things well planned and thought out ahead of time, need it, really, so I know these jitters have everything to do with what happens over the next few hours and days and what that will mean for the future. I also consider the emotional twists and turns that have taken Alexa and me through a few different changes and explorations, together and separately. We've put in work to reach this point and are just now willing to trust each other enough to take this chance. I respect her and us too much to accept anything less than perfect this evening. Once I've thought this through and realize that I'm reflecting more than obsessing, I'm good. I'm ready. And I can't wait to see how the next couple of days unfold.

Alexa

I may need to consider a career change.

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As my Lyft pulls up to the address Mateo shared with me last night, I wonder briefly if I've come to the wrong place. The Flour Mill condominiums sit in a prestigious section of the District where flour and paper mills once lined the 18th century landscape. I can't know this for certain, but I'd have to think these units fetch between a half million and a million and a half each. I'm also thinking that either college professors are doing much better than one would think, or the fine Dr. Da Rocha's best assets are hidden. Not that I'm one to judge a person by their things. But clearly, both the man and his bank account are layers deeper than I've known up to this point.

The thought deepens my desire for him, my press to dissect him and burrow my way into his crevices. Many men would flaunt their wealth as a key part of their mating dance. Mateo clearly has held back parts of himself, the wealth part in particular, but I don't question why. I'll trust that what we feel for each other is real and solid. The feeling is foreign and delicious and urgent and overwhelming like everything else I feel for this man. It's all the things I can and cannot express that etch themselves more deeply into my heart with each encounter.

It's just after 2:30, and the area is teeming with runners, bikers, and folks out enjoying this lovely Friday afternoon. Once I enter Mateo's building, I'm jittery and shaky and need a moment to compose myself. I take a cleansing breath, walk to the front desk attendant to give my name, and am promptly directed to the elevator. I ride to the 8th floor and find my way to unit #802. When I reach his front door, I stand there for a few moments and rifle through my purse to find my phone, needing something, anything to draw my focus away from my insistent jitters and on to something else. But before I have a chance to do more than glance at the screen, the door swings open and I'm struck by the astonishingly gorgeous man with the killer smile standing before me. The only word I can manage is "hi," which sounds small and tentative to my ears as my eyes rove his handsome face. He reaches out and grabs my wrist, pulling me into him and closing the door behind us. Without a word, he claims my lips with his and backs me into the door. As his full, firm lips press softly into mine and

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his tongue licks into my mouth with soulful, sensual promise, I drop my bag and fill my arms with him, needing desperately to close the offending space that separates us. I don't know whether it's the result of a crappy couple of days at work, the freedom that comes with denying us no longer, or the blooming need pulsing shamelessly in my core, but I'm swept heart first into this torrent of emotion and need.

All too soon, he breaks our kiss and I groan as he says with a heartbreaking smile, "About time." His eyes smolder as he rakes me with his stare, reflecting the longing, lust, and relief I feel in this moment and with the promise of what's surely to come. I can't help the impulse that moves my right hand to grasp a fistful of his hair, now free from his ponytail and flopping sexily across his forehead and flowing to his shoulders. I run my fingers through the luxuriously silky strands, and he nuzzles into the contact. This is us, this no-words-required communication that exposes our shared vulnerabilities and underscores the helpless, hungry attraction we share. And it's a relief to allow the oh-so-right feeling to flow freely through my veins. It's heady and intoxicating. Humbling and seductive. It's everything, and I'm emotionally naked before him, willing and waiting for everything he has to offer.

"I think I have hair envy," I say because I can't not comment on his impressive mane. He laughs.

"Then you need to get out more, love." He plants a quick kiss on my cheek. "And for the record, it took you too long to get here."

"How's that? I got here as soon as I could. As soon as I could leave work."

He winks at me and steps away to pick up my overnight bag. "I know. It just took too long for the day to pass." His smile is teasing and lighthearted as he motions for me to follow him. "Come in and let's get you settled."

The brightly lit, poshly decorated space, with its contrasting dark wood floors, cream-colored furniture, and burnished brass accents is modern yet warm and wholly enchanting. From the art on his walls to the sparse, deliberately curated knick-knacks

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accenting the space, it's clear that Mateo has taken great care to fill his home with things that reflect his depth and passions. His place isn't flashy but does reflect culture and sophistication and betrays his apparent affinity or at least appreciation for Greek mythology. On display is Tiepolo's *Apollo and Daphne* as well as a scene from *The Iliad*, I think, where Thetis comforts a distraught Achilles. The effect is calm and welcoming, and I'm charmed by the easy, confident vibe that completely envelops me, much like the man himself.

His massive living room screams man cave with its mahogany ceiling beams, decorative track lighting and what appears to be a rather large and seemingly well-appointed mahogany bar with ornate etchings taking up the majority of one wall. Floor-to-ceiling windows create a stark contrast in the space, flooding the room with light and softening the overall effect of the room's lair-like feel. My eyes pan to the mantel over his fireplace, which holds the room's only photos. I walk over to the first image and am immediately captivated by a young Mateo sitting on a porch step and smiling affectionately as he looks up into the eyes of a beautiful woman who I'm guessing is his mother, who sits on the step above. I'd wager he was around seven or eight at the time, and the evidently candid moment makes my heart squeeze, the love and adoration on both their faces clear. On the other side of the mantel sits a more recent photo featuring the woman I'm assuming to be his mother, older now, with a gentleman who appears to be around the same age. Judging from the strong, familial resemblance, I'd say the pictured couple are siblings, so I've decided that Mateo's good looks come from his mother's side of the family.

"Mateo," I say, hearing him return to the room, "this is adorable. You were a beautiful little boy. I love this!"

I'm struck by the obvious bond between them, so clear, pure, and precious. I'm even more captivated by the smile he offers in reply. It's nothing less than beautiful, revealing his vulnerability, and I decide that this smile, this bare, open expression from him, is the one that I love the best. He's obviously embarrassed, though I can't understand why, so I try distraction.

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“And your place is stunning as well. Wanna give me the grand tour?”

His grabs my hand, tells me to come with him, and walks me through the deceptively cavernous space, which seems far too much for a single person. Mateo keeps at least one of his hands on me as he shows me around the large rooms, which were impressively large and thoughtfully decorated. We’ve never been all that touchy in the past, reminding me yet again that the relationship we built respected the severity of the temptation between us enough to keep it locked down by keeping our hands to ourselves. Sure, we’d held hands. But from his grand gestures to the depth of his passion, I’m quickly learning an undisputed truth about the man: he does nothing half assed. He’s either all in or not at all. The last stop on our tour is his bedroom, and he ushers me inside and urges me to sit on his bed. He kneels at my feet and reaches for my shoes.

“So, look, Imelda,” he teases, invoking the name of the one-time first lady of the Filipinos who boasted a massive shoe collection, “one of these days, you’ll have to show me around your shoe vault.”

He seeks and finds the buckle that releases one strappy sandal and then the other, slipping each shoe from my feet with deliberation. I’m not sure it’s his intent to arouse me, but my body reacts to his efforts nonetheless, and I struggle to maintain even breathing.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wearing the same pair twice.” *He may be right.* “Anyway, let’s put the stilts away – at least for now. I want you to make yourself at home.”

I giggle as his hands brush against the soles of my feet. After placing my shoes neatly at the foot of his bed, he runs a hand up my calf, and I can’t help but squirm as I try to suppress the ache he inspires between my legs. His mischievous hand finds my waist and pulls me up and into the hard plains of his body. Apparently, our relationship GPS has set a course to steer us into each other’s bodies at random points this day, and while I’m in no way opposed to this, I don’t want to come off like some oversexed, over eager

teenage girl because I can't seem to peel myself away once our bodies make contact.

He clears his throat and relieves the building tension. "Let's go out on the balcony. I have some wine chilling unless you're hungry. If you are, I can cook instead."

"I'm not hungry just yet, but I'd love some wine," I say. "It's been a tough couple of days, and I could stand to take the edge off, I think."

He nods and reaches for my hand, leading me back downstairs, around the corner and through sliding doors to showcase an impressive view despite the murky waters of the canal below. He pulls me down onto his patio sofa, pours glasses for us both, and we relax into our afternoon together.

Over the next minutes, I begin the download from my day, and we settle into our small talk. Kali Uchis' *telepatía* plays softly in the background as I explain what's going on at work, his eyes studying me keenly the entire time. He grabs one of my hands and laces our fingers.

"Why do you keep this job, Lexi? You don't seem to like it, and there always seems to be something brewing that reveals that your definition of what's appropriate doesn't conform to the norms your firm seems to prefer. I listen carefully to the things you tell me about your work, so I have to ask: Is it worth it?"

He's not at all wrong in his observations. Mateo has been a close confidante in the months since I agreed to join the firm. My answering smile is likely sad because the questions he asks have weighed heavily on my heart as they bounced around in my brain for the past many weeks.

"I'm not sure it is, Mateo," I answer. "In part, I feel an obligation to Sam. I want to help him restore his firm and the vision he and his partners had for it. Much of the time, it's like he's working towards that alone, and I feel sorry for him. I guess that's why I said yes to this insane plan to have me lead the place for now."

"That's because you feel others' pain like it's your own, love. But what if it's costing you more than it's worth? I'm sure Sam would understand that. And what's his story anyway? If he wants

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things fixed, maybe he should take control himself. Have you thought about talking to him about it?”

He releases my hand, reaches for the wine bottle to refill our glasses, and urges me to swing my feet onto his lap. I hadn't meant to gulp the delicious wine so quickly, just as I hadn't realized how much of a toll this mess has caused in my life until he gives voice to the words. What Mateo suggests makes perfect sense, and I'd have to consider that closely and soon. But not right now.

“It's just not that neat and easy,” I lament with a sigh. “I just want to put the entire thing behind me for now.”

I purse my lips and try to contain my frustration. “So instead,” I pivot, “why don't you tell me how you spent your Friday? I'm sure that has to be a lot more exciting than trying to wrestle the truth from pathological liars.”

As he explains about his unexpected day at school, he begins a slow, sensual massage of my feet, making it hard for me to continue paying attention to anything more than the need he's creating. I reach for my wine glass, once again hoping that a few gulps of the cold, crisp Sauvignon Blanc will put out the fire he's stoking. No such luck.

I think back to our first encounter last weekend and decide that Mateo must have a foot fetish. Then again, I've never considered my feet an erogenous zone, so pot meet kettle. As he keeps up this pressure, my head rolls forward, and my breasts grow heavier as my nipples strain to taut peaks against my blouse. My arousal is clear thanks to the diaphanous bra I've chosen which offers no barrier to the heady things happening beneath. I grow deaf to whatever else he may be saying as I skirt the edges of self-control. Needing to stop this before I potentially embarrass myself, I drag my head up and push away from him. “Mateo,” I pant, “You're killing me.”

Mateo

The heat, passion, and longing that have been raging around inside me since I had my first taste of her a week ago threaten to kill me slowly. I want us to take things slow today, but that look on her face is going to unravel me.

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“I didn’t know you were so easily distracted, love.”

I shoot her a grin, and she yanks her feet from my lap. I think maybe she’s embarrassed, so I grab a thigh to pull her closer to me and tsk.

“Don’t hide. I love to watch you when you get aroused. I love it even more knowing that I do that to you.” I move closer and sniff at her neck for no other reason than the fact that I need to fuck with her this way. “Why didn’t you tell me that your feet are the way to your,” I pause more for effect than anything else and pull back to watch her. It works until I find myself caught up in the passion I’m stoking. I swallow and drop a quick kiss on her lips. I pull back some more and finish, “your softer parts?”

She shakes her head vigorously trying to get ahold of herself. “Believe me, you’re not the only one discovering these things.” She clears her throat and with it the airy lilt I’ll need to hear again before the night’s done. “But look, I really don’t want you to think that my mind plays on a single track. It doesn’t.”

I’m surprised at first by this because the idea never occurred to me. That she’s concerned I’ll think she’s oversexed is absurd but also betrays the fact that she’s still not fully comfortable with me or maybe with us.

“So, let’s both just try to relax and enjoy our time alone. No expectations. No pressures. And no more hiding. Maybe we can just finally be us and see what that looks like.”

Her smile is bright and open, and I know I’ve chased away her concerns along with my own. It could be the wine, too, but hell. Whatever.

“Then maybe we should find someplace to go that’s public,” she says teasingly. “I’m not sure I know how else to endure your emotional strip tease, Da Rocha.”

Though it hadn’t been my intent to leave the condo, we agree that the best way to keep ourselves in check for now is to head for a more public space. We manage to keep the next couple of hours light and carefree as Alexa and I walk leisurely through the arteries that pulse through the heart of Georgetown. We have no particular destination as we idly chat and settle more deeply into

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each other. I feel like I'm learning something new about her practically each minute, and the thought seems odd at first. I'm a trained listener and observer, but there are so many layers and pieces to this woman that the prior eight months of talking, flirting, and spending time never revealed. Whether she hid them, or I simply couldn't see past my fascination with her, I can't be certain. And though it's not a question for the ages, it betrays a disconnectedness inside of me, maybe even a self-centeredness, that I want to correct.

These streets are a lot like my often-busy mind, packed each day with people rushing back and forth, full of real or perceived self-importance. In truth, the local arteries and roadways are little more than a pass through for me, a way to get from place to place without any real meaning or sense of belonging. I live here. But that's about it. As we push our way through the throngs of tourists, hipsters, and idle revelers out ready to kick Friday happy hour into gear, it strikes me that I'm as indigenous to these surroundings as they are. I'm disconnected, self-absorbed, and wholly uncaring of anything save what's on my mind in the moment. Having Alexa at my side, watching her slip into her observant reporter's persona as the masses buzz by, brings these thoughts to the fore. I don't necessarily like what I see. But because I see it through her eyes, it has a certain beauty and stark meaning. I draw her closer, wanting and needing to protect this precious moment and set the stage to see and live each moment fully and presently in the future.

Her phone interrupts my thoughts, but what truly draws my attention is how she tenses in response. I squeeze her hand more tightly, bringing us to a halt and drawing her attention to me.

"You ok? Do you need to get that?" I ask.

She closes her eyes and mutters a curse. "It's Sage," she says, quickly adding, "he's been doing some reporting on one of my clients, and I asked him to follow up on a few leads for me earlier this morning. It's nothing I need to be bothered with right now."

Irritation vibrates from me, and I can tell she's trying to decide whether to answer or ignore him. I don't exactly dislike Vanucci, but I don't trust him. Hell, I'm pretty sure he has feelings for her that go deeper than any friendship, but I'll need to put away these

thoughts for now or risk ruining our time together. Of course, she marks my frustration, closes her hand around my forearm and lets the phone make the decision, ignoring it until the ringing stops while I work to fight back a most unwelcome fit of discomfort.

“Really, no big deal,” she says with a forced smile.

I grunt and allow my frustrations their airtime. “I’m sorry, Lex. But being real, I’m not sure I like your friend. He obviously cares for you and you for him. Can you help me understand that?”

A biker announces his impending presence on our left, so I steer us towards her right to make room. She whips her head my way, a soft smile on her lips. She nods and says softly, “Of course, Mateo.” She nuzzles into my arm and plants her head against my shoulder. As we continue our walk towards nowhere in particular, she gives me the short version of how they met in graduate school, how they’d been friends almost immediately, and how he’d just kind of never gone away. Most important, he’s filled a space in the boys’ lives left vacant when she divorced.

This stops me in my tracks. “What does your ex have to say about that?”

Her eyes find the ground, and she sighs heavily. She nods and presses her lips into a tight line before returning her attention to me.

“Trent hasn’t seen or spoken to the boys since he left.”

I narrow my eyes, a frown across my brow. “What kind of man wouldn’t want to see his own kids?”

She shakes her head, takes a deep breath, and shocks the shit out of me. “He hasn’t seen them because legally they’re not his. He relinquished his parental rights about a year after we divorced. It was his way of breaking away clean once and for all.”

“Alexa, wow,” I say, not really knowing how to respond. “I’m so sorry. That must, well, I don’t even know what to call that.”

I search her eyes, which she’s shuttered against my probing. I want to growl in frustration because I know there’s more. Because she’s still holding herself back. But this is her history to share, so I check my irritation and fortify my patience. I pick up her hand and begin walking us towards a nearby restaurant, and after a few minutes, I relax as she offers me more.

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“The hardest thing I ever had to do was figure out how to tell my children that their father didn’t want to be theirs anymore. Didn’t want to belong to anyone really.” She swallows the sorrow her words must summon and shakes her head. “What I came up with,” she says and turns to look at me, “was to tell them that he was divorcing us all.”

Her pain hits me hard as her words bring into clear view one of the things I try to keep in its proper place. I have no use for memories of the creep show that my parents’ marriage turned out to be. Especially not now, so I stuff that shit back into its worm-filled can and bring my attention back to her pain.

“Then what happened?”

“You try processing the fact when you’re 6 or 9 or 11 that your father not only doesn’t want to be part of your family anymore, but you might not see him again because he doesn’t want that either.”

The family tried counseling at first but soon realized that they needed each other more than third-party advice to help them carry on. The tight bond they forged saw them through the initial tough times as each of them took the steps, together and individually, to live in their new dynamic. To hear her tell it, each of the boys rewrote memories of his father, the most extreme example being Tristan’s rebranding.

“Remember when I told you that he was born with a different name?”

I flash back to the games we played at her house and nod. “Well, this is the reason. He’d been called TJ, for Trent Jr. Why keep a label that ties you to a man who doesn’t want to be your father anymore? It was his way of severing ties and recasting himself.”

A million thoughts race through my mind at this news. The strength of purpose it must take to keep from destroying the person who made your child suffer. The strength of will the child must possess to come to a decision like this so young. I clear my throat and decide to get her talking about Vanucci again.

“I guess that explains some of Vanucci’s attitude and protectiveness towards you then.”

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I glance at her until she turns my way, her eyes questioning, discerning my internal struggle. Lord help me, though, I need to know more.

“Can I ask you something, Lex?”

As she nods, I ask, “Have you slept with him?”

She laughs. “That’s such a man question, Mateo.”

“Is it one you’re willing to answer?”

And she does, explaining how their one encounter ended before its time with her declaration that they should never, ever (in the history of ever) try to be more than friends. That relaxes me, and though I try to resist it, the roar of laughter that escapes my throat also releases once and for all any distaste for the man.

“So, let me get this straight,” I continue once I’ve come back to myself. “You stopped him in the middle of--?”

She cuts me off, shrugs her shoulders, and smiles. “Figured it was better than struggling through to the finish. Trust, we both agree that it was the best thing we never did. We didn’t and still don’t have sexual chemistry, and we’re the best of friends to this day. Feel better now?”

I grab Alexa even closer to me, nuzzling my head into her hair. My lips find the top of her ear and leave her with a thought. “No, love. I’d feel better if we stopped talking about Vanucci altogether. I don’t think that I give a half a damn about him. Not anymore.”

A little after 8, we’re back at my place, lazing on the balcony. I’m grateful that our walk and, though it had not at all been my plan, dinner out gave us the chance to cool off and settle into each other in a non-sex charged atmosphere. I scan my mind for some way to capture this moment. We’ve always been able to fill our time together discussing everything and nothing. It’s one of the things I love most about spending time with her. That and the fact that she’s so lovely to look at. I lose myself in the elegant contours of her face. In her open, sunny smile. But I especially love the hidden pictures I discover in her eyes. This moment and her beauty blanket my mind and senses so completely that I almost forget about the things I need to know from her. Almost.

I raise my hand to stroke her face and dive in. “I love the fact that we’ve been able to learn lots of things about each other over

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these past months. But one thing I haven't learned yet is what ended your marriage. We've always talked around it, so I've drawn some of my own conclusions." I look at her expecting to see resistance. But the sweet, soft smile she gives me encourages me to press on. "I want to know how he fucked it up so I don't make the same mistakes."

Four years ago

Alexa

I watched restlessly as Trent paced the floor of his home office. Our path together had taken a sharp detour just after Treat's birth. To anyone looking from the outside in, Trent and I were soul mates and the best of friends. But any true intimacy we may have had was lost to the past, maybe even an illusion, and I was tired of living with its ghost. He'd decided that I tricked him into having kids. Something I thought was simply a natural progression for us apparently was never part of his vision. Trouble was, he kept that to himself until after our third son was born.

Each time I thought we'd found our way past his expectations of who I should be, how our lives should be better, how much more he deserved, how I should dedicate myself above all else to helping him achieve that and how all of these perceived character flaws and transgressions must mean that I lacked the proper level of respect for him, Trent always found a way to cut and run emotionally. His view of himself – and by association of who I should be – was hardened, and that informed how he dealt with me. There would always be between us the tug-and-pull of our age difference, the 13 years separating us being the one constant he leveraged to maintain the upper hand. He dreamed a dream I was no longer sure I shared. Not sure I ever really did. So, we found ourselves stuck and increasingly resentful. Whereas I tried valiantly to rekindle what first sparked between us, he was solely focused on all he felt he lacked but deserved.

I lingered in the doorway while I sorted through this haze of impressions, trying to remind myself what I was pining over in the first place. I realized that I wasn't even upset about this latest dangerous liaison because I couldn't remember the last time that

I'd felt anything from or for him. I wasn't sure I cared anymore, and that was telling. Though the pieces of our past sometimes hinted that feelings remained, they never clicked into place because Trent refused to let me know what was simmering inside of him. He'd told me plainly that it had been a mistake to allow himself to be vulnerable to me. Never said why, though, and that had always nagged at me. He always kept himself, his thoughts, his heart, and his dreams locked so far from my reach that all I could grasp was longing when I groped to bring him closer.

For Trent, this invisible fence he'd installed between us was his best and final offer. In his mind, I messed things up by wanting something other than to glom onto his dreams and abandon my own. Never mind the fact that he spent 85% of our time together building his business, leaving me to struggle with balancing my own career and our growing family. The more I struggled to manage the two, the more Trent seemed to chide me for not being more resilient. Resilient. I'd rather drink glue than to hear that fucking word because it was Trent's favorite when assessing me. He seemed to believe it should be an easy feat. Just shift a few things around here and there, make better use of my time. Give up something like my job, my friends, my health. But he could never be the one to sacrifice. At least not from what I could see.

He'd become such a master at doling out what lingering love he may have felt for me in bite-sized pieces that I could literally feel his heart retreat quickly anytime our now-rare lovemaking crossed the line from routine maintenance to intimacy. I fought back the warm tears threatening to stream down my face as I considered my growing need to change my circumstances. I needed to know that I was loved. I needed my man to love me deeply, desperately. It was the Achilles heel that had followed me through my emotionally sterile childhood into the present. I knew I'd never find what I needed with Trent.

Finally sensing he was no longer alone, Trent turned, his eyes narrowed, his stance defensive, hands balled into fists at his sides. "Can I help you with something?"

I shook my head and gulped down the waves of hurt and contempt thrumming through my veins. He fried his voice to

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produce the faux deep tenor that usually portended rough roads ahead for us, and I pulled in an exasperated breath as I chose my next words with deliberation.

“You very clearly do what you want. But did you really need to go and screw one of the neighbors?!”

“Do you always have to be so simplistic about everything? I don’t care about her. Let that be enough.”

“You don’t care about anyone but yourself, Trent, but don’t be an ass. That woman lives down the street! Our kids go to school together! That’s complete disrespect for this family. That woman has gone out of her way to let me and anyone else who’ll listen know about it. I’m at the damned grocery store and hear people whispering and gossiping about where you and your dick spent the night. I don’t deserve that. Neither do your sons.”

As the years passed, this standoff had become a familiar battle when Trent was feeling especially tense about our marriage. Or when things in his life weren’t going the way he’d planned. Or when I tried to get close to him. Or just about any other time he needed an airtight shield against being and feeling connected to me. Over the years, as I’d pushed to reclaim what I thought was our marriage, it was hard to ignore the laundry list of should-have-beens and what-ifs – especially since his dick had decided to roam wherever it wanted. I’d taken the indiscretions in stride, determined to keep our family intact. This time, though, I sensed something quite different in him. In me as well.

His face hardened as he began to speak. “And yet, here you stand anyway.” He let his words sink as he assessed their effect. “Well, let me save you some trouble. If you want a divorce, go ahead. I won’t stand in your way. Go and do whatever it is you need to do as you try to find someone better than me. Then you go stand in this sea of shit because you made it.”

I fought for composure as rage and heartbreak competed in my brain for domination. Getting mad and belligerent was exactly what he wanted me to do. It made it easier for him to explain away being an asshole. I sighed before pressing on, hurt but determined to avoid playing into his cruel hands.

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“I never said anything about divorce, but I’m fine with the idea. I won’t keep having this same argument. And I deserve better than you.” It was impossible to mask the hiss that punctuated my last words. I searched his eyes for signs of anything that even remotely resembled emotion. All I could find was disinterest.

But my words couldn’t be unspoken. I’d told my truth. I’d had enough of games and standoffs. Trent continued looking at me, his cold stare replaced for the briefest moment with a look of almost pleading. He seemed to be searching my face for what to say next. Then suddenly he looked away.

“Well, I can’t honestly tell you that I care enough to try anymore.” He seemed to be considering his next words before launching them my way. “Look, Alli.” I gritted my teeth at his use of the nickname he’d insisted I adopt because he favored it. “I didn’t set out to hurt anyone, but sometimes stuff just happens. I couldn’t care less about Malady,” he shrugged carelessly as he tried to explain away his neighborhood fuck buddy. He sprinkled his venom with that off-putting giggle that I swear he practiced in his spare time. He’d perfected it and had to know that it fucked with me. “Like I said to you so many times before, real life’s not nearly as simple as the little world you’ve made up in your head. Sometimes, shit just happens.”

I don’t know why, but this was the tipping point that caused me to drive the final nail into this coffin. “I’ve tried to be what you want. What you need. Yet, you criticize when there’s no need. You find faults in me that are neither present nor warranted. But understand this: you can’t and won’t remake me because that’s not what *I* want. That’s not what I need.” I swiped at a rebel tear that refused to remain under wraps until a more appropriate time. But I made sure that it alone was the only show of emotion he’d witness from me. “There’s no fixing this.”

He looked at me blankly for more than a few minutes, and it was impossible to tell what was on his mind. Then he shook his head and twisted his face in the now-familiar look of contempt and triumph that foreshadowed a mortal blow.

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“Sweetie, don’t do this. Save your emotions. They’re lost on me.” Again, with the maniacal giggle. “Now if there’s nothing else?”

He rubbed at his temples as his words hung in the air, and it was clear that our conversation was done. So, I shook my head, forced my chin up with false confidence and walked away.

Some time that night, but before the sun could rise again, he left. The next time I heard from him was in a voice message: *I’m done, obviously. I’ll have someone come around for my things when time permits.*

Present Day

Mateo

I've always been a better observer than most, and I've probably sharpened those senses since meeting Alexa. It was the only way I was going to get under the adamantium shield she'd wrapped herself in. Right now, I feel her processing something that, to others, would seem trivial. Needy even. To her, though, the memories have shaken the Earth and broken her heart yet again because affection isn't something she knows. This is something that we unfortunately share.

She seems to hold her breath, her eyes cast to the ground like she might be struggling with what to do or say next. I reach over to urge her onto my lap.

"I think you're strong. I admire that, and I'd never ask or expect you to be any less than you are." I reach for her hand and lace it with mine. "And I won't let anything or anyone who came before shape us." But she still won't meet my eyes.

"Look at me," I urge her as gently as I can, which is tough. This passion I feel is a squall, creating an urgent reawakening as she sweeps in and gusts with gale force. I feel urgent and edgy, so when she keeps her eyes down a beat longer than I'd like, I raise her chin until our eyes meet so she can see the truth she needs to feel.

"I see you. Even when you don't want me to. Whatever hurt or doubts consume you, let them go. I—"

My voice breaks, thick with the understanding of this broken girl's distrust that the people who say they love her mean it. "Never doubt us."

And because I can't hold myself back any longer, I pull her into me and crush her lips with mine. We fall into each other as our kiss again awakens the sexual storm that swirls between us. This time, we let it.

"Inside," I moan, needing to prop her against the first wall, window, or hard surface I can find. We stumble into my den where I back her against a wall, bring my hands to cup her ass, and lift her up, urging her to wrap her legs around my waist. I praise her through ragged breaths before lowering her to the ground and

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leading her upstairs to my room. When we reach the top of the staircase, I bend down to scoop her into my arms. This woman inspires everything primal inside of me to strut on full display, and I guess she must be able to see it. My eyes dare her to hide any longer, and tension thickens the air as we trek to my bedroom. When we finally reach the bed, I place her on the edge like a China doll and kneel at her feet. When I look into her eyes, I see myself and am humbled by the trust reflected in the haunting amber of her irises. Again, I *would* like to take it slow with her. So not happening. But I need to find some control.

She reaches for the hem of my shirt, and I swat her hand away. Deciding to use her frustration to reign us both back in just a bit, I smile and shake my head at her.

“Not till I say.”

She protests with a small pout, and I tsk at her. “Oh no, sweet Alexa. I’ll make you wait longer if you pout.”

Her face falls somewhere between disbelief and frustration, both of which I use to stoke her desire as I try to control the ferocity of mine. I reach around to release her from her shirt and reveal the depth of her arousal, her nipples clearly erect, tightened to hard points for me. She groans in pleasure-pain as I pull the thin fabric of her bra aside and nip one then the other with my teeth, soothing the sting with my tongue. “Let’s get you out of these,” I say, tugging at her second-skin jeans. The urge to climb inside of her is almost vicious now as my need to claim this woman as my own for the rest of time swells and roars through my veins. I want to erase the wrongs and hurts from her past, drape myself around her, possess every inch of her, and be her shield and her solace. I slide my hands up and down her soft, caramel-colored legs and hook my hands around her hips. “Let me taste you,” I murmur as I slide her closer to me and place her most sensitive parts on my tongue. She tries without success to stifle the moan that escapes her throat when I take my first taste, her hand flying up to try and muffle her moans. I reach up and swat her hand away from her mouth. “Don’t. Let me hear you. Let me know when I make you feel good. Understand?” She nods, as lost in these

moments as I am. I spread her legs wider with my shoulders and return my mouth to her throbbing center.

I insert one finger then another inside of her, making each lap of my tongue that much more intense. She's like a wind-up toy, and I'm the lucky kid who gets to play with her. I need to know just how much punishment my toy can take without destroying her. So, I dip my tongue inside, lapping up each sweet drop of her arousal. Her hips thrust to meet my hand, and her whimpers grow as she climbs higher and higher with each rhythmic pulse of her muscles.

"You're so beautiful when you come for me. Let go, baby."

"Mateo,--" clearly soaring and lost to my exploration.

Alexa

I never get the chance to say more ... at least not with cogent words. Every muscle in my core explodes. The voice I hear crying out is hoarse and husky. It's also one I've never heard before, just left of uncivilized, and the fire hose that erupts between my legs leaves me craving more.

"I need to be inside you. Now," he says as he climbs off the bed and peels off his jeans and briefs, allowing himself to spring gloriously, abundantly free.

I look at the ridiculously gorgeous sculpture of a man towering flawlessly by my side. He stands stroking himself as his eyes lick the entirety of my naked body, making me feel seen and beautiful and cherished. And so very urgent for him. It's hotter than anything I've ever experienced. It seems like an eternity before he finally climbs over me, almost as if in slow motion. And I'm not at all prepared for the tidal wave of desire that pierces my core as he slides himself languorously along the slickness oozing between my legs.

"Lexi," he groans, his self-restraint clearly eroded, "I'm clean. I don't want there to be anything between us. Ever—"

"Me, too. I'm on the pill. Haven't been with anyone in ages ... and I trust you," I whisper, my eyes glued to his, telling him how ready I am, how much I need to feel this. To feel him. He nods, nuzzles against my ear, and gently nibbles at the lobe. Reaching

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down to guide himself with one hand, he nudges me apart and eases himself inside inch by perfect inch until he's completely seated. I sheath our connection as he levers himself down with his forearms on either side of my shoulders. He pauses to let this reality wash over us as the green of his eyes deepens with emotion and desire. I'm so lost in this sensation, in these feelings, lost to this moment, as completely lost to him as he is to me. I squeeze him as he moves inside of me tenderly, maddeningly, sweetly, and I fight back the tears that ecstasy threatens to trigger. I tear at his shoulders and arms, anything to try to gain purchase as every part of me wants to fly. I want control, but I want to be lost inside of him just as much. And I don't really think the final decision will be left to my conscious mind, which I can't seem to access any longer.

He sucks in a breath on a hiss as his body melds with mine, causing me to grope and clutch at him to close any remaining space between us. He loves me with a slow, lazy rhythm as he nibbles at my ear, worshipping me, whispering his praise for me all while stroking me like he owns me, like he's been deep inside of me more times than we can count. This is the unmistakable connection that had been the great unspoken between us. I'd managed to resist its pull by writing off my fascination with him as lust. But it was never just about that. I know that with full clarity now. Sure, I've had good sex before. But this, right now, this suspended moment in time, feeds a hunger I will only ever be able to sate with Mateo. I know it. And so does he as he chips away at the last barriers between us.

"Mateo," I call to him, his name a plea through my pants and gasps. My eyes meet his as he levers himself up until he's sitting on his haunches, never losing his rhythm as he reaches down to twirl each of my nipples between a finger and thumb.

"Alexa," he rasps, answering my cry, my need for him as thick and as deep as he is inside of me. A small, arrogant smile plays on his beautiful lips as I writhe beneath him. "Feel good, love?"

Try as I may, I simply cannot use my words and groan in reply, my back arching even higher as his thrusts drive my desire to a fever pitch. I lever up on my elbows to watch the place where our

bodies meet, entranced by the sheen of my arousal glistening on that thick column as he works into me relentlessly. Mateo's body heats with absolute need as he slows his pace and deepens his grind against me. Without question, I feel his need, his want, his greed for me. He continues working into me with fever and reverence, and my barely concealed emotions threaten to spill themselves all over this moment. Luckily, I find enough presence of mind to catch myself, and use my near-fail to will my mind to simply enjoy our coming together.

Mateo

She groans as her core tightens like a spring ready to pop at any moment. I feel a gush of wetness as muscles deep inside of her work me with urgency. I've found that one perfect spot and slam my eyes shut as her sweetness grabs at me like vise grips. "Shhh, love. I've got you. Let go for me, Lexi," I demand, "Let go." She wraps her legs tightly around my waist, bucks wildly beneath me, and arches up against me as her release consumes her. My control erodes as I feel her body shake with all the pleasure she can stand. She takes me as forcefully as I'd taken her and my own release grips me, wringing me out like never before.

I've been with plenty of women, but nothing in my experience has prepared me for this. I know she feels the same as we lay together, wrapped in this transcendent moment, unwilling, maybe even unable, to let each other go. This profound connection that had only been a suggestion, a whisper of a possibility, was now in-your-face real. I settle into her, finally allowing my body to go limp as she melts once and for all into my soul.

We lay spooning for who knows how long after the best, most intense orgasm of my life. A hazy bliss coils around us as I run my fingers down her arm, my hand stroking back and forth aimlessly, leaving a trail of goose flesh in its path. I watch the gooseflesh with awe, keenly aware, supremely proud, that my touch does this to her. That I'm the one who makes her feel like she's flying. I nibble at her ear, which makes her giggle softly and mold her ass into me more tightly.

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Bzzzzzzzzzz. Bzzzzzzzzzz. Bzzzzzzzzzz.

She shifts slightly as my phone's vibrations fill the room. "No. Ignore it. Just lay with me."

"Ugh," she groans in frustration, turning around to face me. "Somebody's got other ideas." She peels her body away from mine, and I'm struck by the tremendous sense of loss that instantly consumes me. "Somebody's gonna pay," I mutter as I move to the side of the bed, lean over the side, and fish through my pants pocket for the offending phone. I swear when I see it's my buddy Dez Mendoza. I note that it's nearly 9 p.m. and take a half-interested look out the window. In the time we've been lying here, the day has faded to night after this breathtaking finale to a heart-stoppingly emotional day. Dez can go get fucked. I smile inwardly because, knowing my jackass of a friend, that's exactly what he's after. Trouble is, his game isn't nearly as strong as he thinks, so he's likely reaching out for a wingman as he sets out to prowl for ass. I make a note to tell him to scratch me off that list. All I want is to be alone with this woman, to lose myself deep inside of her as we explore this decidedly new phase of our relationship. She's watching me when I turn to her again, and she's visibly tense. *What the hell?*

I study her for a few moments, hoping that's not panic I see in her eyes. She scoots over to me and cuddles into my shoulder.

"That's obviously someone you'd rather not talk to right now," she says, nodding towards my phone. "If you need to handle it, I can leave you to it."

I toss the phone off the bed, roll her on top of me, and run my hands up and down her shoulders. "After that," I say, nodding towards the other side of the bed, "you should know that I don't have anything to hide from you, Lexi. It's a friend of mine, Dez, and he's probably looking for someone to go trolling with."

I regard her for a moment, this gentle, fiery, perceptive woman who has more masks and bravado than a Commedia dell'arte actor. She thinks I'm shutting down on her, so she's responding in kind. She needs to think again. So, I drag us to sitting and pin her to my lap. "Hey, look at me," I say when she tries to avoid my

eyes. When she doesn't immediately respond, I use my index finger to force her to see me.

"What just happened? What's wrong?"

She bites her lip as she debates what she wants to tell me, so I shake my head to stop whatever manufactured nonsense she's conjuring to toss my way.

"And don't tell me it's nothing, love. What are you thinking?"

Alexa

I feel my cheeks heat because without saying it explicitly, his words let me know I'm up a tree. He's done nothing to raise my suspicions, yet my mind is quick to brand him secretive. It was a phone call. Nothing to see here. But I can't ignore the deluge of fears and feelings currently descending on me. I'm sure he sees me taking the full measure of my self-imposed mental anguish, and after letting me stew in it for a moment, he continues without waiting for a response.

"I've never felt anything like making love to you, Alexa. I know you felt it, too." He pulls me deliciously close, his smile bright, open, and honest.

My pulse picks up as he sizes me up, daring me to hide from our reality. So, I don't. "Yes, of course. It's just--"

My words fall off for a moment, but I know better than to think I can just let this hang. So, instead, I sort my words and let them fly.

"It's been a long while is all."

I'm not the sort to get hung up on labels and relationship definitions. I also know, I think, that we're on the same page. But you know what they say about assumptions. His answering smile was devilish yet pure.

"I can see that. And I can also see there's something you're not saying. Behind the iron curtain that shields your eyes from most of the world, I feel the remnants of happiness that you've tucked away deep inside. I want your happiness and to know that I had something to do with making you feel that way because you've made me feel again. You make me laugh. You are the most

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exquisite, sexiest, most thoughtful, most intelligent woman I've ever known. I want you and only you, baby.”

I'm sure the smile that splits my face could light a small, third-world nation, and I can't not jump on him now. Though I'd like to say he attacked first, I'll just say that his defenses bungee jump into oblivion as I begin my exploration of this very fine man and his incredible body, attacking and devouring him from head to toe with my mouth.

Chapter 13

Sunday, September 15
Alexa

I greet Sunday morning with sore limbs and a delicious ache deep inside of me. After we've managed to clean up and get dressed, I decide to fix us brunch, insisting he stay put. I also must get the chance to play around in this state-of-the-art kitchen. From its golden-beige granite countertops to the Viking stove top and oven and Sub-Zero over-and-under refrigerator/freezer, I'm seduced into submission and spurred into action. For the first time in forever – scratch that, in ever – I can honestly say that I feel like I *have* to cook. As I scout the well-stocked fridge for brunch fixings, he grabs a bottle of champagne from the built-in wine storage panel, places it on the counter and moves in behind me to grab my ass and pull me into him.

“Hurry up, girl. You’re studying like there’s gonna be a test.”

I pull away and playfully chastise him. “If you kept your hands to yourself for more than a few minutes, maybe I could concentrate. Besides, you really need to let me play around in here for a bit. It’s not every day I see a kitchen that looks like it was designed for the set of a cooking show.”

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He blushes, embarrassment tinting his cheeks, and though it only makes him look that much hotter, it's also curious. I move closer so I can reach up to stroke his cheeks and slip my fingers into his soft, silky hair. He indulges me in this exploration, settling into my touch and light massages, and at a point, I almost think he's about to purr. He catches himself and my wrists, removing them from his hair and bringing them to his lips to kiss.

"I've been meaning to tell you all weekend that you're the first person I've ever let do that." I flash him a quizzical expression and he continues, "put hands in my hair. That's my no-touch zone." He gives me a cheesy grin. "But for you, I make the exception." I feel my core squeeze as he kisses my hands again.

I laugh. "So, none of your other women—"

He nips my fingers and I gasp in surprise at the slight bite of pain. "I have no other women. I only want you."

I bite my lip as realization grabs me. I truly was playing and didn't mean the words as he received them. I shake my head, but he presses forward before I can speak.

"I know that's not what you meant. But I don't think you understand. Before you, any woman I spent time with wasn't in a relationship with me. They served a purpose, so I kept certain boundaries between us. I rarely shared kisses with them. I've never brought a woman into my home. And touching my hair? A hard no."

He threads his fingers through mine and leads me to a bar stool hidden under a lip of the kitchen island. He lifts me into place and steps between my legs.

"Those things suggest an intimacy I didn't want or need. Until you came along."

I return my hands to his hair, combing my fingers through a couple of times before bringing them to rest around his shoulders. "I won't take the privilege lightly then," I respond, my voice soft, near reverent. But I need to return to the task at hand lest I get pulled into the swirling sex vortex that's never too far away when we're sharing the same space. "And because this food won't cook itself, I best get back to what I was doing before you distracted me, Da Rocha."

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He backs away, albeit reluctantly and offers me a smirk and a wink. “Not my fault you can’t keep your hands to yourself.”

I slide off the stool and head back to the refrigerator, determined to get the goods to begin my culinary exploits. “Then let me give you my back. That way, I’m immune to your many charms.”

We laugh and fall into our respective tasks, my focus on meal prep, his on plying me with yet more alcohol. This morning, grapefruit mimosas are his poison of choice, but I’m not complaining. I accept the bubbly offering and find my food items as Mateo provides the soundtrack for our late morning kitchen exploits. I begin preparing a seafood quiche as the first soulful, mournful bars of Vinicius Cantuária’s *Amor Brasileiro* pour through speakers I can’t locate. He returns to the kitchen after a few moments, and I regard him as I try to unravel the last pieces of the mystery he inspires.

“You’re up to something,” he remarks as expected, noting the question in my eyes. “What’s up?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Just curious. Wanna tell me what else it is you’re into that pays for digs like this?”

He laughs and eyes me with interest. “I was wondering when you’d get around to asking. You think maybe I’m into something illegal?”

“Not at all,” I say quickly, meaning it. “But what I do know is that teaching at a university without tenure isn’t likely to set you up like this,” I say, waving at the surroundings.

“Fair enough. And you’re right. Teaching didn’t grow my portfolio.”

He considers me for a moment and reveals the secrets behind his well-apparent fortune. Over the next minutes, I learn that Mateo left his father’s home under such terrible terms that the two would never again speak during the older man’s lifetime. He’d been content with the estrangement, he explains, because the sharpest memories of the man were dark and dreary.

It had been a shock to learn of his father’s passing. The news brought a mix of regret and relief, which was only compounded when he’d received news that his father had named him as the sole

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heir to his estate. So, at the age of 26, he found himself \$6.5 million richer and at the center of a legal challenge from his brother and sister-in-law (the same one to whom he'd been engaged), who fought unsuccessfully for a slice of the inheritance. He'd been investing the money in various streams over the past few years, growing it quite nicely, positively, and legitimately. It was his way of atoning for his father's brutality and inhumanity.

What he tells me next is when things get interesting. He'd been able to remain in the United States under the F-1 Visa program so long as he was in school and pursuing his field of study. Once he'd earned his doctorate, he needed a green card if he intended to stay. So, he bought one.

A little-known fact is that individuals of means the world over can establish residency in a new country by making a substantial investment in their adopted land. Commonly known as a golden visa, this green card is granted in exchange for substantial economic stimulus. In fact, countries would once use this immigration loophole as a lure to attract wealth to the nation. Mateo discovered it when he consulted an immigration attorney regarding his options for remaining in the US legally. The attorney, a partner at the firm representing Mateo as his father's estate went through probate, painted a gloomy outlook for his chances of getting a green card any time soon, suggesting it might be better to abandon the effort and simply return to a simpler way of life. Instead, Mateo fired the firm and found one whose culture was more tolerant of his. With their counsel, Mateo invested close to \$4 million to launch a luxury town car rental service. The company launched with 10 drivers from disadvantaged backgrounds as stipulated by the immigration code. Within a year, Mateo had established a profit-sharing system that allowed consistently reliable drivers to buy ownership shares by setting aside a portion of what they earned until they'd saved enough for an initial investment and could make a purchase. As a result, Arrive in Style had become a significant employer for lots of deserving, hard-working people as well as an investment vehicle for those who understood the value of planning for tomorrow. Not being one

for the spotlight, he'd been careful to keep his name under close hold. Still, I could tell this was a source of pride for him,

"Show off. So, is there anything you can't do, Da Rocha?" I ask.

He bites his lip ruefully and shakes his head vigorously. "Plenty, but if I've got you thinking otherwise, so much the better for me."

I smile but then a concerning thought passes. He's kept these details to himself until I asked. "I know what you're about, Mateo. I don't care about your things. When I say that you've impressed me, I mean that I truly admire the way you've used your assets to help other people. That speaks to the man you are inside." I press my palm flat to his heart. "That's all I care about."

Wednesday, September 18

Alexa

It was more than a chore to rise this morning. Though it's only mid-week, I feel like my decadent weekend with Mateo was ages ago. All this week, Wilson Hedgepeth and several of the top Storey|Fischer|Stone execs have created so much churn and discord here that managing personalities has been far more challenging than working to sort and put to bed their bad deeds.

And yet, none of it can hold my attention for longer than mere minutes. Though we've only been able to steal snatches of time together this week, Mateo lets me know he's never far away. Our texts and chats are my lifeline, planting me ever deeper inside my feelings. I've never been one given to daydreaming, but I may have let my mind conjure ideas and fanciful notions of what a future with this man could look like. But I have to find my focus and quick.

Though she's no longer managing director, Sydell did find a way to regain a spot among the executive leadership by creating a seat as client services VP. In this new and wholly useless role, she's gone full-court press to support Hedge in his quest to dominate headlines and gain admiration. On Monday, she made a great show of leading a training session to prepare him for next week's sure-to-be shitshow at the *Post*. I'm convinced the man is incapable of being coached and even more certain that Sydell lacks the chops

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to succeed at being a PR intern let alone media trainer. Fortunately, some of my work with the man seems to have stuck, but only time will tell if he steps in it when we sit down for interviews next week.

Today, she'd shifted her push to ensuring SelmaTec's place as S|F|S's latest marquis fuck up of a client. Our executive team has set a meeting to discuss and vote on this for next week, though I've been clear in my intentions to remove myself from the entire process. Surprisingly, I've met with lots of resistance in this. Apparently, my colleagues believe that I should be able to be objective. To some degree, I get it. What I don't know how to make them see is that my staying out of the process is not only indicative of my objectivity, but it's also the firm's best chance at clearing SelmaTec.

"Alexa?" Gigi Brancose's voice pierces my thoughts as my intercom comes to life. "I have a call parked on hold for you. They won't give a name."

I sigh, completely over this place and it's barely 10 a.m. "Can you take a message for me?"

She hesitates a moment then says, "I tried that, but the guy's really insistent."

"Alright then," I concede, figuring it's yet another vendor trying to make a pitch for my time. "No worries. Put him through."

She thanks me and connects the call. "Alexa Winston," I say, my voice laced with impatience.

"Good morning, Alexa *Winston*."

As if today hasn't felt like being trapped inside a lost episode of *The Twilight Zone*, hearing this voice again cinches that feeling and freezes me in my tracks. As ever, he sounds tense and disconnected from anything that doesn't require him to experiment on it.

"Trent? What's wrong?"

Damn, I curse silently, realizing that I should have expected this call well before now considering his apparent involvement with SelmaTec.

KIMBERLY GREER

“Nothing’s wrong, Alexa,” he snaps then quickly clears his throat to regroup. “Except perhaps your decision to take back your maiden name.”

“That sometimes happens when people divorce, but how can I help you?”

If my years with this man taught me anything, it’s that ignoring his jabs and cutting to the chase is the best strategy. He laughs but it’s mirthless.

“Well, it’s good to hear your voice, too. I was hoping we could catch up a bit seeing as though we’ll be working together soon. I wouldn’t want that to feel awkward. And I thought it was high time that I check in to see how you’ve been doing.”

I’m not sure what pisses me off more: the call, the premise for the call, or the fact that he’s so matter of fact about the whole thing. Or maybe it’s the fact that he’s assuming I’ve agreed to work with him because I haven’t. Though my true response lies in the silence I allow to fill the line, I eventually press on as though he wasn’t a complete and disconnected moron.

“Trent, if the firm decides to take this work, I won’t be working with you.”

“That’s not what I’ve been promised.”

“Then, you’re misinformed. I’m not the best person for this account. I won’t cause anyone to call my ethics into question.”

He clucks his tongue. “I’m not sure I understand, Alexa. Of course, you’re the best person for the job. You’re the only one as far as I’m concerned.”

Seriously? His comment strikes me dumb as I take the phone from my ear and stare at it in sheer disbelief. It takes a few moments to collect my thoughts, and once I do, I unleash them magnificently.

“Let me clarify for you. At present, my firm is vetting yours. If that check comes back with satisfactory results, the firm may onboard you as a client, but I’ve recused myself from this account.”

His sigh, exaggerated and unnecessarily audible, takes me back to a place I’ve refused to visit ever again. So, I prepare for whatever foolishness he’s about to allow from his lips.

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“I can’t say I’m surprised at your reaction. But I will say that I’m disappointed that you’d be this petty.” When I don’t immediately claw back at the slight, he presses on, apparently emboldened. “You should want my business. This would be a vanity account for your firm, and I hear that’s something you could really use right now. Don’t be a fool. Let’s strike an accord so we can move on to other things.”

I could take the bait and have this fight, which is probably what he wants. I instead force my tongue into submission and dig down deep for a dose of civility and dispassion.

“Seems to me that if an accord were really what you wanted, you’d refrain from the insults and bravado. You’d be focused on the fact that I could have done a hit job on your efforts to engage our firm. But I recused myself. That was the kindest thing I could possibly have done for you, Trenton, and you’d do well to keep that in mind no matter what the firm decides to do.”

“Come on, Alexa. You can’t be that naïve. Landing us would be a goldmine, and I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt your position with the firm. Are you really going to let our past get in the way—”

“In the way of what exactly? And in case no one has told you, there’s not much more up for me at Storey|Fischer now that I’m serving as managing director. You may want to keep that in mind before trying to bully me into submission.”

“You’re managing director?” Trent’s voice is filled with disbelief and something akin to mockery. “Since when?”

The hint of amusement in his voice scrapes at my nerves, but I’m not willing to let him know that. I’m also not willing to let this fool take up too much more of my morning.

“Trent, my best and final offer is that I’ll see to it that a fair and impartial process is conducted as we decide how to proceed with your firm.”

“Fair? It’s hardly fair if you won’t vouch for me!”

I laugh aloud and say, “That’s exactly why it’ll be fair. Left to me alone, there would be no doubt of the outcome.”

“Oh? And what outcome would that be?”

“Look, I’m not going to fight with you. More than that, though, I don’t want to work with you. But I’m not going to share that with anyone. That’s why it’ll be fair.”

The line is silent, long moments stretching into forever before he finally replies.

“You might want to reconsider your position, Alexa. It would be in your best interests...and not just monetarily.”

Is that a threat? I consider this briefly while deciding whether to respond or let him roll on, but he makes that decision for me. “Perhaps I could drop by. Talk things out. Help you come around to my way of thinking.”

There’s something odd in his tone that I can’t quite read. It rests somewhere between flirtatious and ominous, and that just won’t do. “No need and please don’t.”

“Nonsense. Apparently, you need some coaxing, and it’ll be good to see the boys again.”

“Don’t come near my children ever again.”

“That sounds like a threat, Alexa.” The amusement in his voice galls me. “And you should know I don’t take kindly to those. When can we talk?”

“We’re talking now. Say whatever else you want or get off my phone. And for the record, I’m not threatening you because that’s not my style. But I will protect myself and my family as necessary.”

He expels that harsh breath again, taking me back to the many times during our marriage when he prepared to flex his dominance. Too bad I’m not that same girl anymore. Well, too bad for him anyway.

“You don’t seem to get it. I worked my way out of obscurity in the science. I’ve won the recognition that I deserve, and I’m going to continue to win. You’re the only one who understands where I’ve been and can help get me to where I deserve to be.”

I chuckle because I simply will never go there again with him. Does this fool not know that? “I’m sorry, but I don’t owe you, and I won’t help you, Trent.” I consider what I want to say next briefly before I just go for it. “As I told you, I won’t stand in your way with our executive committee. But I can’t stand for something that

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I don't believe in. Accept that and please just let us go on with our lives."

He scoffs. "We're not done with this, Alexa. I can't accept that. I won't accept it. But we can play it your way. For now. And in the meantime, let's plan a time for me to see the boys again."

My heart races. After Trent left, I did everything I could think of to make him build the boys into his life. He didn't fight me for custody or even ask for visitation. Rather, he stopped listening to my pleas and, through his attorney, informed me of his decision to give up all parental rights. He set up bank accounts for each of them: one for current expenses and one for educational use. He paid me off quite nicely, too. A one-time alimony payment. So financially, we'll always have everything that we need and then some. Emotionally, though, for the boys, well, that's another story.

"I won't be socializing with you, Trent. And according to the court, you don't have any kids."

He sighs. "Oh, Alexa. That's just semantics. We'll see."

"No, Trent. There's nothing to see. Nothing to discuss. And that's final. Good day."

I kill the call and ram my head into my desk. I was a fool to think this encounter wasn't inevitable. Of course, our paths would cross as both he and Sydell's minions fight to get their way. Sage's reporting has yet to yield any new insights that might explain why Trent or his partner would jump into business with Hedge. Even less clear was what brought the former associates back together again. Until I can sort this and make it make sense, I'll need more powerful ammo to combat the groundswell of bullshit that always follows Trent and his every endeavor. Luckily, I have Trey. I pick up my phone and ask him to pull together a backgrounder filled with good sense, deep knowledge, and as much damning detail as he can scrape together. Perhaps seeing the truth in print will help the Storey|Fischer team see what their wallets won't.

By 3 p.m., I'm fatigued by the giant lift it's required to try and sort through the tattered relics of Sydell's tenure as managing director. From unpaid invoices to incomplete programs, it's clear that her focus has been on securing her personal goals to the detriment, it seems, of all else. I drop my head to my desk as I

resist the temptation to give into the despair that grows inside as I uncover the breadth of priorities that need to be added to my do-this-immediately-or-else list. Add Trent's call to the lineup of craptastic things, and all of this would overwhelm if I let it. So, I don't let it. What I do next is reckless. I have work to do and precious little time to play. Fending off Trent and the damage that always accompanies him should be job one. But I need a release as well, so what I do next is necessary. At least that's what I tell myself as I text Mateo and make plans to meet him as I take a breath and regroup from the day.

Mateo

I fish my smart phone from my jeans with dread. For the past few hours, my uncle has been reaching out consistently, and that's never, ever good news. Not lately anyway. *Call immediately* his latest message demands, and I'm grateful to have a legitimate reason to stonewall him yet again.

Giving a test. Will reach out when I can. I shove the phone back into my pocket and scan the collection of bowed heads before me. Hands busily scribble out arguments as the final hour of the exam nears its end. I give the 30-minute warning much to the chagrin of fully a third of my class, who sit looking bewildered and flummoxed as they work to divine valid answers to the questions posed. I've lost count of the number of times I've been asked about my plans to curve the exam or offer extra credit. I won't commit to either, which only adds to the mounting frustration and confusion. I've never been one to teach to a test, provide templated examples, or lay out solutions that can be aped or mimicked, a fact that likely correlates directly to the number of complaints lodged against me by entitled, incurious, lazy-ass students and their parents over the past couple of semesters. These are the kids who've been taught how to get good grades on tests instead of learning how to master concepts. They've been handed high marks all their lives thanks to the insistence and meddling of their parents, who have no real sense of their child's intellectual capabilities or lack thereof. Grades are no longer a reflection of mastery but a point of pride. This, in large part, has

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stolen the joy I once felt in the classroom and has sapped my desire to make a difference in the lives and minds of students.

I swear to myself as my smart phone vibrates yet again. I dig the damned thing from my jeans in disgust, only this time, it's Alexa.

Alexa: Drinks later? Please? I'm having the day from hell...

Never far from my thoughts, images of Alexa quickly begin to play on loop, ready to soothe away my angst, and that should bring me some peace. Instead, these thoughts of her underscore my growing vulnerability as my heart longs to be close to hers. I've fought a surprising battle over the past few days as I struggle to get my head on the same page as my heart regarding Alexa, but fact is, I'm not as ok with the idea of a relationship as I thought I'd be. I need to get my shit together, though, and fast. I tell myself that it's the newness of things between us. It's only been a few days and yet I'm not nearly as sure of myself as I'd thought over these past months. I know that I want her in my life. I know that I don't want anyone else. What I don't know is whether I'm cut out to sustain a relationship as deep and as intimate as the one we've begun to carve out. But I quiet this nagging voice and make plans to meet her in a few hours.

I close my eyes and search my mind for something, anything to ease the many tensions and apprehensions competing for airtime in my mind. I glance at my phone yet again and am grateful to see that this exam will end in about three minutes. But as I look out at my class, I find a new, most unwelcomed arrival seated in the back row. Emery Stallings, daughter of university provost Ellison Stallings, sits beaming, waiting for me to acknowledge her, and I cringe. I shake my head to let her see my disdain clearly, but never one to be deterred, she blows me a kiss and turns up the intensity of her smile.

When I began teaching here nearly seven years ago, Emery and I formed a loose association. It was a couple of months that meant far more to her than they did to me. Still, she continued to make herself available over the years, hopeful that I'd change my mind and give her more of my time and eventually my heart. But even

as I took her up on her offers, I was never down for more than a quick fuck. If I'm honest, she never was more than a decent accessory and a way to pass time. There's not much to see beyond her outward beauty, and even that gets eclipsed by a nasty disposition and even bigger ego. This entitled mean girl refuses to see that she's been little more than a scratching post for me, and over the past couple of weeks, she's begun doubling down on her pursuit.

I pull at the tension growing in my neck and shoulders and will the next few minutes to fly by so I can dismiss her and get back to sorting the important things in my life. It's not in my nature to be confrontational or unduly harsh. But I know deep inside that nothing short of that will defuse Emery's stalking.

I gather my thoughts and my belongings as I steel myself for what I know will be uncomfortable and unpleasant as I call time, collect tests, and entertain questions from the few student lingering behind. When the last one leaves, I climb the stairs, pausing at a point halfway to sit on the arm of one of the aisle chairs and cross my arms.

"What do you want now, Emery?" I ask, my voice cold and clipped.

Her face falls, betraying the tough-girl persona she thinks everyone buys. "Well, sugar," she begins, a hopeful look on her face, "you've been tough to get ahold of. I wanted to find out what time you'll be picking me up for the reception tomorrow."

I shake my head and slice a hand through the air. "I won't be picking you up, Emery, because we're not going together."

"Nonsense," she counters, "we always go to these things together. And how ever will I find a date on such short notice?"

I give her a tight smile as I grab at the pinching pain in my neck. "Not my problem. And who says you need a date? Anyway, we've been over this, Em. But since you don't seem to know how to take no for an answer, let me make it as plain as I can. We had our time. But you and I were never what you thought we were. There's nothing ahead for us, and there's nothing left to say. Nothing's going to change that. We'll never be permanent, and I've been

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clear on this with you. We're done." I shake my head and turn my attention to the floor.

"But if you'd just give us a chance." Her voice is pleading and pitiful, but I won't let myself feel sorry for her or feel guilty for allowing her to fall for me.

"No, Emery. I don't feel that way about you. I never did," I shrug. "And I know deep down you know this. You've always known it. So, for the final time, stop counting on me to be your plus one. Don't look to me for anything. I'm done with that."

"Look, sugar, you still want to sow those wild oats. I get it."

"You don't get anything about me. Just let this go." I stand, more than ready to leave this insanity. "Once and for all. Let it go."

She stands and gathers her blood red Birken bag, placing it dramatically on one arm as she begins descending the stairs. She stops about three steps above the place where I stand and lets her inner bitch take hold of the reigns.

"Now you see, that's where you're dead wrong. I know you owe my father and your uncle for helping you get to where you are today. I also know that it's impolite for you to refuse to show your gratitude."

"Your point?" I challenge, bored of her well-worn challenge and position.

"I'm just saying, Matt, that it would be a shame if my father had reason to think you're not down with his program any longer. That couldn't be a healthy turn for your career."

As she paints on that saccharine smile, I fight back nausea and laugh but not because I find her soft threat funny.

"I don't get you, Emery. Why don't you go find someone who actually wants to be with you? Who actually enjoys spending time with you instead of trying to blackmail me into your bed?"

"Oh, I don't know, Matt. I see what I want right here. And if you give it some time, I can make you change your mind," she purrs, her expression flirty and hopeful.

I sigh and move to leave, tired of this merry-go-round discussion. As I climb the steps, she calls after me, demanding that

I come back to hear her out. Instead, when I reach the exit, I turn and give her the coldest stare that I can.

“Emery, it’s time for you to move on because I have. Now goodbye.”

Friday, September 20

Alexa

The man I spent time with two nights ago was a prior version of Mateo, the one I’d been reluctant to begin a relationship with. The one who danced around intimacy without ever truly embracing it. I know with certainty that something was off with the man even though he said all was well and deflected my attempts to pry him open.

It seems he must have reconsidered his position on things, going out of his way since then to let me know his thoughts are with me. Shortly after I dropped the boys at school on Thursday, a work crew arrived to clear the tree felled by the storm a couple of weeks back and begin to repair my battered rose garden. This was Mateo’s answer to my insurance company’s delay in processing my claim and beginning necessary repairs to restore my garden to right. About an hour later, a black SUV pulled into my driveway, apparently at Mateo’s direction, to drive me to work. Then, an hour or so before lunch, and over my very loud objections, he appeared outside my office after hijacking *Good Noshes by Cameron*, a food truck we discovered near his penthouse that features my favorite healthy wraps and salads. After rerouting the mobile eatery to my office, he’d made a huge show of getting me to meet him outside and dragging me along, running hand in hand, to get to the truck and move it before it could attract a crowd it wasn’t licensed to sell to.

None of this rang quite right with me, and the more I let him know that, the harder he protested. However, time ended this round in a draw, and so I let myself put away the misgivings and simply enjoy the fact that we’d yet again bent time to be together. Soon enough, we’d be off in our different directions, and though I was left luxuriating in his generosity, it didn’t mask whatever was off with him.

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I awoke this morning to a completely over-the-top display of breakfast pastries and flowers, and I decide it's time to get to the bottom of whatever Mateo thinks it is he's trying to prove. Tucked between the pricey scones and designer cupcakes is an invitation to dinner, complete with a number to call a car that will take me to our destination when I'm ready to leave.

Mateo and I plan to meet at *The Green Garden*, a quaint, hole-in-the-wall bistro in the Adams-Morgan section of DC. From the looks of things, we'd both spent longer than usual trying to make ourselves look like we hadn't spent longer than usual preparing for our evening. Mateo arrives wearing dark jeans, a mustard-colored t-shirt that molded to the rippling terrain of his torso, and a grey-hued herringbone Burberry blazer that up-lights the fire in his gray-green eyes. His hair, ever lustrous and sexy, hangs in soft, jet black waves that dust his shirt collar. I smile appreciatively when he walks through the door, trying valiantly to be subtle, but I'm most definitely checking him out.

We share a fabulous meal, engaging conversation, and too much wine. We laugh, we dance, and we flirt. But whatever's been wrong with him is amplified now. I try not to put too much stock in my suspicions, writing them off instead to nerves over agreeing to explore a romantic relationship. It's clear, though, that he's aloof with me, and I don't know what's up with that.

When it's time to leave, we walk to our town car to drive back to my place. I'm happy for the extra hour or so that we'll spend together, giving us more time to train our attentions fully on each other. Things seem to normalize between us somewhat during the ride, putting me at ease and quelling the sinking feeling that's been welling inside as the night progressed. When we pull into my driveway, he walks me to my front door, where we linger in an awkward silence for what seems like eternity. And because I'm empowered by the fine chardonnay coursing through my veins, or maybe because I want to shake the negative vibe he's been radiating all night, I push up on my tiptoes and cup his face in my hands. Gently but tentatively, I bring his face to mine and kiss him. He takes over the kiss with some urgency but soon pulls away and stares into my eyes, though I can't be certain what he's looking

for. He tilts his head to the side, smiles cryptically, knowingly even, and walks down one step until he's just above eye level with me. He drops a kiss to my forehead then brings his lips to nuzzle my neck on a spot just below my ear, causing me to melt into his arms.

"Let's go back to your garden," he whispers into my ear.

I back away from him and extend a hand to walk us from the steps on the opposite side of the porch, down a length of sidewalk and around the corner to my garden. I sit on the swinging loveseat, but Mateo has other ideas. He grabs my hand, pulls me up and walks us towards a more secluded corner flanked by border shrubs and a tulip tree. Under the cover of shadows now, he stops us at the edge of the patio and reaches for my hands, giving them a tight, quick squeeze before linking them with his own. As he stares into my eyes, I see the depth of his vulnerability, and it steals my breath. My mind catches on the carousel of emotions that continue to spin around us tonight as I reach up to cup his cheek with one hand. He closes his eyes and leans into my touch, empowering me as he gentles himself for the first time tonight. As I move my hand to his chest and bring the other to plant beside it on the muscled plane, his eyes open slowly to study me as I soothe and stroke my way downward, outlining each contour of his torso, abs, and waist. He draws in a shaky breath as I grab at his belt buckle, finding the target of my exploration. My busy hands work quickly to relieve him of his jeans and briefs, then I crouch to take his growing erection into my mouth. I give a quiet hum of appreciation as he immediately thickens in my mouth and threads a hand through my hair. I tighten my lips around his length and use my tongue to tease the thick veins and broad head. I feel him throb and grow impossibly harder, so I increase the pressure, sucking and tasting, tugging, and pulling at the length of him. Aside from the occasional strained sigh and low grunt, Mateo remains unusually still and quiet. The only sign that he's emotionally present during this interlude is when he tightens his grasp of my hair and brings his other hand to the side of my head, driving deep and hard down my throat. As he works his hips faster and pushes me to my limits, I can no longer breathe, and tears begin rolling down my cheeks. I know he's close, so I bring a hand

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to his balls and squeeze to coax his release. He stiffens one last time before I feel him jerk as he spills himself in my mouth. I swallow as much as I can, and when I release him from my mouth, I use my tongue to lick him and my lips clean.

After a moment, he pulls me to standing then takes a few steps back as he pulls up his pants. Still silent, his eyes search mine, but what I see there sends up warning flares. He's detached and aloof, his emotions veiled and allowing me to see nothing of the man who plays my body and emotions like a virtuoso violinist bows a Stradivarius. I take a step back as well as panic fills the space passion occupied moments ago.

"What's going on with you tonight, Mateo?"

He gives me a small smile and shakes his head as he steps closer to me and into a more well-lit area of my patio. He reaches for one of my hands and places a rough kiss there before saying in a low voice.

"Nothing, Lex. I'm fine. Stop overthinking."

"Hard to do when it's so evident something off with you." I bring my arms to cross my chest and shake my head. "Something's been off all night. For most of the week really."

"I told you I'm fine. Stop stressing."

It's not his words but their flippant tone that slips into my ear and brutally rips my mind away from the moment. He seems so different and distant now as he shifts his head to the side and gives me a half shit-eating grin.

"Just feel, Lex." He sighs and walks over to sit on the circular brick wall, crossing his hands in front of him, his gaze on the ground. "I'm not sure what it is you need to hear. I'm here with you."

This is going nowhere, I realize, as the man who sits before me is a stranger. He might as well have scratched his nails down a chalkboard. It's not his words. It's his demeanor, which is detached and disinterested. I search his eyes for signs of whatever the hell happened to the man I've fallen for. Finding nothing, I take a deep breath and spill my guts.

"Wow. Ok," I say finally. I fall into a pace to gain some clarity before saying what needs to be said.

KIMBERLY GREER

“You haven’t been making sense to me lately, and I’d like to wrap my scrambled brain around it. You’ve showered me with gifts all week. All thoughtful, really, but I can see and feel, hell, I can even taste that something’s been off. It’s there when we talk. It was there when we met up the other night. I felt it on the porch when we kissed, and I feel it now. I don’t know how to read that.”

I pause to sigh and check him for any reaction, balling my palms into fists at my sides when I find none.

“I’ve been clear on this, Mateo. I’m not some toy for you to play with until you get tired and break me. But right now, you’re not giving me any reason to think that’s not your intent.”

I’ve never been a fan of sharing my emotions, especially those that leave me feeling rubbed raw. But Mateo’s lack of response and his seeming absence of empathy quickly transform my mild discomfort to outright horror. He sits still, studying me but not uttering a word. I can feel dread and withdrawal pouring from him in heavy waves, but his face remains unreadable.

“Look, I’m done finding reasons to fight my feelings for you. What I thought we wanted together and how you’ve been acting recently don’t seem to line up, and that’s tough to handle ... especially right now.”

I hate the way my voice trails off at the end of my little confession. But screw it all to hell. If it made him uncomfortable, that’s just too damn bad.

“Lexi, love, listen to me,” Mateo finally says. He rises to his feet and walks over to me, reaching out a hand to stop me in mid-pace. He reaches with the other to stroke a wispy curl away from my forehead as he studies me. After far too long, he gives me a smile that brings the hairs on the back of my neck to attention.

“I’m tired of you fighting me, too. And I thought we’d finally gotten past all of this. So, stop.”

Two. Three. Four. I fail to swallow the gasp that escapes my lungs. He seems glib and subtly amused by my freak out, and that knocks my already frazzled composure to its knees.

“Just stop?”

“Sure. Stop. No more fighting. Just feel.” He shrugs and flashes me a sexy, knowing grin.

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“Alright then. What I *feel* is that I just made a fool of myself. Hell, I’ve apparently been a fool for months now. So, I think I’ll just stop *feeling* before shit gets ugly.”

Mateo tilts his head to the side apparently waiting for me to say more. When I don’t, he knits his brow. “And that means what exactly?”

“It means I’m tired of trying to guess what I’m getting with you,” I hiss. “Is everything a game? On one minute. Off the next. That may be ok for some, but I’ll pass, thanks.”

My voice is definitive even though I’m anything but. I’m dying inside, but I won’t let him know it. If I give any more, I’ll most definitely get my heart broken ... if it isn’t already. I’m not trying to pin Mateo down or push him to adopt a label for our relationship. But I know that I want to be with him. All of him. I thought I’d read him clearly ... until I stopped paying attention with my head. I’ve worked overtime to shield myself from the pain of relationships by not having them. And something tells me that this isn’t heading where I thought. In fact, it’s hard not to think that Mateo patiently waited me out, weakening my resolve bit by bit until I had no choice but to give in to what he made me feel. So, it’s time to stop this madness before it rips my heart from its safe, tightly controlled cage. If he doesn’t know how I feel, he won’t have the power to use it against me, right? Without giving him a chance to respond, I move away, give him my back, and call over my shoulder.

“You know what, just go, Mateo. Forget tonight ever happened.”

I wave a dismissive hand and take a brisk walk into the darkness where I can hide from my gross error in judgment.

“Go play your games with someone else.”

He calls for me to stop, but I can’t. I won’t. I return to the front of the house and wait for him by the side of his town car. He appears a few moments later, his pace easy and confident.

“Should we maybe talk about this?” he asks. But when I don’t reply, he suggests, “Tell you what, let’s talk tomorrow. We can sort things out then.”

KIMBERLY GREER

He bends down to kiss my cheek, and I force myself to stand mannequin still, refusing to let him get to me any further as tears threaten to spill down my cheeks. He searches my eyes before walking forward to open the car door. He's clearly struggling with himself over something, but I can't worry about that. He turns back and our gazes lock, but he can't and won't gain passage into my thoughts. They're on lock down alongside my heart. I see something like regret in his eyes when he eventually speaks.

“Sleep well, Lex.”

He folds himself into the car, and I climb the porch steps to find shelter from this emotional storm.

Chapter 14

Several hours earlier ...

Friday, September 20

Mateo

I've said this before, but I'm so glad I don't teach on Fridays, otherwise I'd have had to cancel today's classes. I've been antsy and edgy for tonight, especially after last night's parade of bullshit. All week, I've been fighting with my feelings as I grow into my reality with Alexa. I've been slow to admit that I'm still getting accustomed to the idea of being in a relationship, and it still scares me. But what was a good kind of scary earlier in the week has only blossomed into a fear I can't seem to manage.

Now, I can't lay all of this at Alexa's feet, of course. My uncle plays a starring role in my growing agitation and discontent as he keeps at me to get what he wants. I made a brief appearance at last evening's dean's reception, making the appropriate rounds, gripping and grinning in the name of tenure and in support of my uncle's campaign to succeed Ellison Stallings as provost. I had trouble hiding my amusement at Emery's obvious attempt to get a rise out of me by bringing a date along for the night. When she made it a point to come up and introduce us, I acknowledged them both with a cordial, affable greeting designed to deflect her advances and cosign what I thought was the new object of her

obsession. But it seems my lack of interest in her or her plus one only deepened her resolve based on the 12 texts and phone calls from her following my early departure. That only got her blocked, and I know it's only a temporary solution. She's an ever-present problem shelved until another day. She's also a solemn, ill-timed reminder of why I don't do relationships.

More concerning at present is dear Uncle Antonio, who made it his priority to let me know first thing this morning that my early departure alongside the fact that I didn't attend with Emery was duly noted both by him and Dr. Stallings. Though he'd like me to believe that attending social events from beginning to end was an important part of my path towards tenure, I know better. The man plays campus politics like an intramural sport. He has the passion for it and has some skills, but he doesn't have the training or finesse to be a difference maker down the stretch. I know nothing of college politics and don't want to. But I know that my uncle believes he needs an entourage of support, a personal street team to send about from this place to that, talking him up and creating support. Because I'm allergic to bullshit, and because Emery and a couple of other women in his fandom are shamelessly thirsty, I usually find myself busy with my outside pursuits.

Though I may have put my uncle off for now, I know I haven't heard the last of this. He's beyond pissed, so I'll need to think of how to manage him in these coming weeks and months. I can't worry about any of this now as anxiety hums through me about the evening ahead. Having inherited a strong sense of personal style from my mother, I've never really been one to fuss over clothes. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't unsure of myself as I dress for this date. I finally settle on black jeans, a fitted t-shirt, and a blazer, just the right amount of classy casual so I don't look like I'm trying too hard. Beck would have a field day and never let me live it down if he knew I'd given a shit about what clothes to wear. The thought makes me laugh.

As I head to the bathroom to shower and get ready, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, and for a moment I think it might be Emery but swipe to answer anyway, more than ready to

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sever and stomp out any remaining hopes she feels she might be able to shove my way and wear me down.

“Teo?” a sultry voice on the other end slinks across my skin and flares my nostrils like an unpleasant odor. The one person who ever called me that is the one person I never want to hear from again. “It’s Janny.”

I’m immediately transported to a place 10 years ago when my world was forever changed, to the moment my brother and fiancée announced their marriage, to the last time I heard her voice. Past feelings, colored with betrayal and disbelief, collide with my present outrage and contempt as anger erupts in my chest.

I close my eyes, breathe in, and unleash my fury. “How the fuck did you get this number?”

“Teo, please. I need you. I’m begging you, please just give me a few minutes to explain.”

The laugh that escapes me sounds wild, untamed, a lot like the fury she inspires. “What could I possibly do for you?”

My anger ratchets up a notch when she doesn’t immediately respond. “You have 30 seconds before I hang up.”

“I made a mistake,” she says hurriedly. “I’m leaving Nico.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with me?!” I scream into the phone, a second away from coming unhinged.

“Wait, don’t you care? I thought you’d, well, I thought that maybe we—”

“Never again, and not my business. You now have 10 seconds.”

She sighs and clicks her tongue, quickly recovering from the faux hysteria she affected only moments ago. “Ok, fine. I need to talk to you. I don’t have anyone else to turn to. I wouldn’t ask otherwise. Won’t you please help me? He, uh, Nico—”

“Don’t care. And I can’t help you. Whatever it is, ask your husband. And lose. My. Goddam. Number!” I break the call.

The phone rings again moments later, but I ignore it, block the number, and slam the phone on the kitchen counter. I utter a string of curses, angry that the sound of Janeilia’s voice could so quickly transport me to my most painful memories. I’ve been over her for so long, but the lessons of her betrayal remain, shaping and

solidifying my guiding principles. I can't let her get in the way of what Alexa and I could be, so this on top of the lingering mess with Emery is the absolute worst time for her to resurface.

I shove the thought and stalk to the bathroom, determined to reset my mind. I set the taps as hot as I can stand, strip, and walk into the shower. The steamy water pelts my skin, needling away the tension and rage of the past few minutes. I place a hand on the wall and rest my head on top as I blank my mind and will it to return to the present. After a few minutes, I calm down and my breathing steadies. I need to wrap my brain around all of this, this uncharacteristically strong reaction to a simple phone call. But I know that will be harder than it should be. As I reach for my body wash, my mind moves double time to sort through and tidy the mess my ex just made worse. I know that I'm over her. I also know that loving her was a cautionary tale of what can happen when love meets with seduction fueled by greed and pride. I've worked all of this over in my head to the point of exhaustion and know that's not what's triggered me.

What I feel for Alexa is pure and unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's a living thing inside of me, growing and flourishing the closer we become. But that also makes me vulnerable and perhaps not the best judge of my actions, let alone my feelings. I turn to let the brutally hot water assault my back as I grudgingly count off my fears. Alexa is nothing like Janeilia, but love is a fickle bitch, dangling her beauty and wiles to tempt one moment, then slicing your veins for the fuck of it the next. I've been meticulous in my dealings with the opposite sex up until this point. I think with the little head and leave the heart out of it. With Alexa, I can't afford to make a mistake, and up until these past few days, I thought I was solid in my conviction to take this next step with her. To make her mine. But with my mind scattered like this, I'm feeling off my game and not quite sure of anything.

I curse as I kill the shower and will my fears into submission. I grab a towel from the linen closet, dry the water from my skin and walk to the bar in my living room. I pour a shot of Glenlivet 12 and welcome the burn in my throat and the slight buzz that blankets my brain moments later. I'm liable to fuck everything up

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if I don't calm these thoughts and get ahold of myself. I resolve to put on whatever veneer I can conjure until I can reconcile the screaming in my head with all the feels and fears in my heart. It may not be the best solution, but it's the best I can come up with for now.

I meet Alexa nearly an hour later, hoping upon hope that I can keep my head in the game and away from my past, but it's proving to be a herculean feat. I spot her the minute I enter the restaurant and summon all my courage and convictions to move past the unwanted, unexpected fears of the past days and hour to focus solely on this gorgeous, sexy woman who's captured my affections like none before her. My heart skips as she moves toward me, her dress simple yet stunning in the way it moves so sensually with her curves and accentuates her stride. Though she's trying to be graceful about it, she's clearly checking me out, which eases my edginess a bit.

We enjoy a great meal and even better conversation, but the vibe between us is off, tainted by the dark apprehension that won't allow me to settle into this evening the way I'd intended. I know she can tell something's up because my head's not all here – not after having a slice of my past reappear unbidden and unwelcome in my life. As much as I might try to deny it, I'm in self-preservation mode, and that's threatening to rewrite the evening I'd planned for us.

Desperate to regroup and settle my angst, I default to charm and flirtation, my ever-present suit of armor when matters of the heart threaten to cloud my sanity. The more she opens to me, the deeper I sink into despair, which only encourages the asshole in me to come out and play.

When we get her back to her place, her kiss strips me bare, but I can't let her know that. I break the contact and nuzzle into her neck so she can't see how much she affects me. I don't want to do anything stupid because no matter how off my game I am right now, nothing has changed the fact that I want Lexi in my life badly. But wanting her, wanting *anything* this badly can't lead to anything good, right? After all, the biggest reminder of why I'd sworn off relationships in the first place bared her rabid-ass fangs just hours

ago, and my mind is screaming to pull back on this thing swelling in my heart for Alexa. It's taken on a life of its own, but no matter how ready I thought I was for this moment, I can't bear to admit it just now. I need to step back and figure out how to deal with this. I also don't think she wants to put our business on display like this as we remain entangled on her front porch. This, in part, is why I suggest that we take this someplace else. It also gives me a chance to recalibrate and regain control of my raging emotions.

So much for the best laid plans.

Because our non-verbal communication is off the charts, I know that she knows that something's up with me. Still, I try to dip and dive my way through the intimacy I fear yet want desperately to share with her. The fear and uncertainty in her eyes gut me, so when she drops to her knees in front of me, all I know to do is to give in to the pulsating need between us. Given the headspace I'm in, I had no intention of taking things this far with her tonight, but if we're lost in each other, I reason on the spot, we can't think, and something inside me says this is the best possible place to take shelter.

What she makes me feel as she demands my release has the opposite effect. I watch in awe as she pulls at my shaft, marking and possessing me with every tug and pull. The emotions she elicits threaten to sack my control, so I resolve to shift power back my way as I fuck her mouth. Of course, I'm only fooling myself. I'm already lost to her, but she can't know that – not tonight anyway. As she brings me to a soul-shaking climax, I draw inward, retreating against the beautiful sensations, too shocked and raw to admit how exposed I'm feeling. The thought rattles me to my core. Makes me want to run away so I can think through these many conflicting notions colliding in my head and demanding entree into my battle-scarred heart. I pull back and study Alexa as I fasten my jeans, but regretfully, that serves only to deepen my vulnerability. I lose myself in the dreamy golden-brown orbs staring back at me in equal parts wonder and fear and I freeze.

When she asks me what I want from her, I shut down. I search her eyes but blank my own of any passion or tells. I swallow and try to find the words to express my heart's desire, but none come.

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Instead, my mind intervenes, bringing a halt to this bliss. My shield firmly in place, I work to calm my ragged emotions as my mind grows hectic with noise and panic. It's all I can do to push back my instinct to put space between us until I can figure out how to handle the mess of feelings and anxieties competing for my attention. Right now, it's just too much. I'm locked in full-on self-preservation mode, which is how I manage to ruin this night for us, letting my inner rogue take the lead.

Big. Fucking. Mistake.

I've upset her. No, mortified her is more like it. I don't want our evening to end like this, but I need time to confront what I'm feeling. As a result, most of what might come out of my mouth is likely to cause her to shut me out for good. So, I take the only remaining, sensible option. I suggest we talk tomorrow once we're clearer headed. I say goodnight. And I leave her looking torn and heartbroken.

I allow the self-loathing full license to tear around inside of me as I head home. What I don't anticipate is that she may not give me the chance I need to explain and redeem myself.

Chapter 15

Saturday, September 21
Alexa

I'm not sure what time it is. Hell, I'm not even exactly sure what's real right now. I sit up and scan my surroundings. I'm in my room. Check. The clock on my nightstand says it's nearly 11 in the morning. Not ideal, but check. Then, I look to the floor where my discarded clothes lay following last evening's strange encounter with Mateo.

"Ugh," I groan and fall back against my pillow. I shut my eyes as if the movement will reset and hopefully erase the memories that come rushing back as the fog lifts from my brain. Scenes from last night flash before me, and I now understand why doom and regret have filled my heart. I don't want to move. I just want to lie here and try to figure out what happened this past week and why. Then again, I'm not sure I can begin to sort through any of this until I've had at least one cup of coffee, so I grab a clean t-shirt and shorts, tie my messy mane into a not-quite-so-messy top knot, and shuffle from my bedroom.

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I find Lindy finishing up the morning dishes as I enter my sunny kitchen. I scan the room further and am grateful for the absence of children from the immediate vicinity.

“Morning, sunshine!” she greets me, her face expectant until she takes a closer look at mine. She dries her hands and walks to meet me in the middle of the kitchen. “I was going to ask you how the evening went, but that’s not a happy face.”

I’m an exposed nerve, pinched between doubt and disappointment, and I can’t seem to find my voice. I squeeze her hand, force the muscles in my face into a weak smile, and move towards the Keurig for a cup of inspiration. I can feel her eyes on me, but I’m not ready to speak yet. Once my coffee is brewed, I take a sip, close my eyes, and ask, “Where are the boys?”

“Out with Luke. They should be at Sugarloaf Mountain for their hike by now.”

“Again. Wow,” I marvel because the Winston boys thrive on having variety in their diversions. I’m impressed and supremely grateful to have this time away from them to lick my wounds and return to my senses.

I feel Lindy edge up behind me, her impatience to know what’s happened nearly radiating from her body. “Ok, Alexa. Out with it. What happened last night? You’re shattered. What did he do?”

I sigh, motion for my friend to join me on my kitchen balcony and give her the lowdown on my strange evening with Mateo. She studies me as I finish my sad tale, a small, sympathetic smile on her lips.

“What?” I ask defensively. “You have something to say. Just say it so I can go back to bed until the boys get home.”

She leans forward and grabs my hands. “I see why that might freak you out. But there’s something you’re not telling me, or maybe something happened that you don’t know about. Either way, you need to talk to him if you ask me.”

“Good thing I’m not asking you then, isn’t it?”

“Maybe not, but you know that won’t keep me from dishing out advice to the lovelorn,” she volleys back, and I brace for the dose of reality that probably won’t go down well.

KIMBERLY GREER

“Nothing of what you’ve told me about your guy lines up with how you say he emotionally ghosted on you.”

She sighs and excuses herself while she goes back into the house. A moment later, she returns with my smart phone, which I must have parked on the table by the front door when I dragged myself into the house last night. She hands it to me.

“This thing has been buzzing almost from the time I got up this morning.” I take the phone from her and unlock it to find 20 calls from Mateo beginning around 6:30. “So, you know I had to peek. Wanna know what I found? The man’s been blowing up your phone for hours.”

I send up a silent prayer of thanks for hiding text previews from the lock screen because as I take the phone from her hands to have a quick look, he’s apparently hit me up that way, too. I’ll wait until I’m alone or until my head is clearer to decide whether I want to open or delete the messages as I look to her.

“Your point?”

“He knows he owes you an explanation, and you owe him the opportunity to offer one.”

“Lindy, you don’t get it. He triggers everything that could shatter my heart. Last night was just a reminder that I can’t be what he wants. Better to know now than before my I get my heart broken.”

“So what? You bail the minute you two hit a rough spot? I don’t think you have enough information to make that call, girlie. Maybe if you take the time to listen—”

“No!” I erupt, shocking us both because I rarely raise my voice.

“Oh, honey,” she says, her eyes full of empathy and compassion, “step back for a minute. Be honest with yourself. How do you feel about him?”

I sigh and shake my head. “I don’t know right now.”

“I don’t believe you. I can’t remember ever seeing you so emotional about, well, anything, ever, and his acting an ass last night didn’t help matters. Now isn’t the time to hide in your room and hope it all blows over. You need to face this.”

The tears I’ve been fighting flow down my cheeks, a flood of emotion spilling unchecked as I let myself feel the depths of

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confusion and disbelief over the night's events. "I just don't understand, Lin. We have this connection that won't tolerate bullshit. But he's been pulling away from me all week. And then last night, he was someplace else entirely. He was off. I knew it. He knew I knew it, too. But instead of copping to it, he had his shields up and lied his way through. Worse, though, there was something about his attitude that made me feel cheap, like what I thought we could have together was never a possibility. Like everything's been a game and that I was a fool for thinking otherwise. Hell, the very thing he said he didn't want from me was precisely what he was trying to make us."

My phone begins vibrating in my lap, announcing yet another call from Mateo. I decline the call and drop my head to my hands. Lindy strokes my back lightly and pries my phone from my hands.

"When you're ready, he's the one you should ask. But for the record, I don't think a guy who feels like you described would keep calling. He knows he fucked up. The question is whether he had a good reason and if you can accept it."

I sit there letting myself fret it out until the tears refuse to fall any longer. Because I'm not a crier, Lindy doesn't quite know what to make of things. But, like the true friend she is, she pushes me to get back on my feet, get cleaned up, and do what any self-respecting, wound-licking woman would do: grab lots of wine and plan for an emergency girl's night in.

Alexa

Monday, September 30

It took me all of last week to scrape up the nerve to listen to his messages, which continued to pile up as the days dragged by. I always find it tough to settle down for sleep on Sunday nights, so instead of staring at the ceiling praying for sleep to drag me out of consciousness, I began decoding the issues behind his behaviors as I opened the steady stream of voice and text messages he'd left over the past many days. The clarity did little to soothe my restless, ragged emotions. Disquiet shrouds each thought, each act, each breath that I take, urging me to find resolution.

Though I'm torn about whether and how to move forward, I decide to at least reach out. What I do know is that I miss him, so before diving into the week's work, I take a moment at my desk to shoot him a quick message.

Me: Just got through your messages ... thanks for laying it all out.

It was plain, non-committal, and the best I had to offer at present. The text bubbles appear immediately, and I realize I'm on edge as I wait for his reply. They disappear and reappear several times over the next few moments, and I'm shaken when he instead calls. I'm not ready to talk with him, though, so I let the call roll to voice mail. He texts instead.

Mateo: Lexi, please pick up. Talk to me, love.

I want to but not yet. I don't have answers and don't want to give him or myself false hope.

Me: Soon.

But someone's clearly not in the mood to be put off.

Mateo: Meet me for lunch then.

Me: I promise we'll talk soon. I need more time to figure things out.

Mateo: We can do that together.

Me: And we will ... soon.

I put the phone away and with it the temptation to give in to his wishes. I need my focus, and that won't happen if I let him into my head just yet. My cautions continue to loiter, especially after the way he reversed course on me during our date – even if he'd been triggered into the weirdness he displayed. Trying to sort these thoughts has made me jumpy, edgy, and just not good company. It's become simpler to focus my hectic energy on work even though I'm quickly discovering that this job might break me.

Though I'd had severe reservations about agreeing to serve as Storey|Fischer's acting managing director when the executive committee voted to remove Sydell, I find that I'm increasingly grateful for the added, albeit exponentially heavier, workload. I've filled these first few days in my new position trying to decipher Sydell's management game plan if you can even call it that. Of course, the woman herself was no help, having stonewalled me at

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each request to hand over any strategic plans, client development reports, anything that might have helped me gain insight into the firm's top management priorities. With each passing day, it becomes clearer that Sydell led this firm with personal wealth and image goals as her sole guiding principles. There was no plan. There were no insights, and it's become well apparent that the time it'll take to uncover the depth of her grift and incompetence will rival the time it takes to train and qualify for the Boston Marathon.

And just like that, and with all things, really, my mind works its way through a series of convoluted, unrelated ideas back to the man who continues to invade my thoughts, dominate my dreams and whether or not I want him there, my heart. I understand that Mateo was spooked when his ex called him last week before our date. I'm not mad about that. But that doesn't explain his odd behavior in the days prior, and neither has he. As a result, something inside of me has cracked, and I haven't been brave enough to inspect the damage yet, opting instead to seal everything up and keep to myself. I need more time to think things through because I know myself and can see that maybe I'm not being fair to Mateo, that perhaps I'm jumping to a conclusion I shouldn't.

All I know for certain is that keeping my distance from him has left me empty and bereft and longing for him. My friends are starting to worry, and I wish they'd stop circling the wagons to try and bring me back to myself. It's only been a week or so. I'm still afraid to face the truth, whatever it may be, for fear I'll find myself lacking. Having my head in the sand may not be healthy, but it provides a useful bunker for my wounded pride. I've never been one to lean on others in my despair, so Lindy and Sage caught mighty tongue lashings from me in their quest to soothe and console. When Phaedra decided to unleash her unique brand of advice and recrimination, she was duly warned: *thou shall not throw shade if thou cannot throw hands*. I'm grateful for their concern, but they can't bring the consolation I need. That will only come by considering all the evidence, and there's only one way to accomplish that. When the time is right, I'll need to hear from the man himself.

KIMBERLY GREER

The buzz from my office intercom breaks through my private thoughts, announcing a call from Sam. I pick up the call but wish I hadn't when I hear what he has to say. I close my eyes as he paints a scenario that promises to shake me.

"Your SelmaTec backgrounder created such a stir last week that Sydell invited Trent to meet personally with the executive committee to clarify some of your findings." He pauses and breathes out a harsh breath. "Caverton's set to arrive within the hour and insists that he meet with you beforehand."

"For what possible reason?"

I hadn't bothered to tell Sam about Trent's call over a week ago. Now seems like a good time to do that, but when I do, it gains me no advantage.

"That's why he's here, my dear. He's livid about your recusal and is determined to have you working with him. I know there's more, but he won't say. Says he'll only tell you."

So, Sam and I construct a loose plan to give the man the meeting he wants and reiterate my position on matters. I'm not interested in hiding, but I insist on maintaining control of when and where I talk with Trent. We'd meet with him at noon in Sam's conference room to hash out whatever needed hashing out so that I could get on with my life.

I spend the next 20-ish minutes answering emails, returning a few calls, and refusing to acknowledge the knot of dread gathering in my gut. The problem with Trent was that I never knew who I would be talking to. In some settings, he could be witty and engaging. Quirky. But normal. In others, he was a caustic, drizzling asshole. It was like he was two different entities, and I got whiplash trying to sort just who I'd be dealing with from day to day. I don't miss that.

After a point in our marriage, I'd gone mute with him. It was simply easier than engaging in the inevitable debates about the smallest of things whether or not such detailed discussion was necessary. When the mood struck, or when I hit a nerve, or when whatever pissed him off pissed him off, he'd have no qualms letting me know how ungrateful I was. How much of a disappointment I'd been. At the first sign of these significant

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cracks, I'd tried to convince him to talk with me or seek counseling. But he couldn't be bothered with that. No matter how tactfully I tried to communicate my thoughts and feelings, he had a unique way of ripping the words apart and rearranging them and their meaning in ways I never intended. It was like he could reach inside my head, reorder my thoughts, and feed them back in whatever way suited him.

So no, I really don't want to deal with him. Like ever.



Noon arrives far too soon, but I've had ample time to comb through some additional research that Trey Jackson compiled to prepare me for this ill-fated meeting. Trey can find out anything about anyone, and what he'd discovered about Trent deepened my concerns and solidified my determination to keep him at bay. He'd gathered a swell of shock, outrage, and censure from anyone with a stake in growing, shaping, and regulating AI applications. Though anyone else might get a clue after such public shaming, Trent was apparently energized. He doubled down on an array of loophole arguments to move opinion regarding his science and his beliefs. Whereas the scientific community determined he'd lost his ethical compass, viewing him now as more of a mad scientist than a legitimate peer, Trent pushed the idea that science needed to broaden its view of what defines a clone and modernize its ethical code, thereby enabling the expansion of the type and scale of applications for which AIs might prove useful.

I consider his collaboration with Hedge for a moment. His madness, whether real or exaggerated, and Hedge's irreverence are an unstable isotope, and I want to be far away from the nuclear holocaust when their energy begins to leak and decay. I resist the kernel of dread taking root in my gut as I school my thoughts, my face, and my emotions on the brief walk to the conference room. I affix my best neutral smile to my lips as I grasp the handle and enter the room.

"Sam, Trent," I say, keeping my voice as serene as I can manage, "good afternoon."

KIMBERLY GREER

Trent eyes me with an odd cocktail of surprise and interest that immediately puts me on my guard. His ice-blue eyes, standing out in stark contrast to his slightly olive hued skin, dilate and darken, betraying his sexual curiosity, as he rakes me from head to toe. I'm usually not one to favor suits, but the unusual chill in the air this morning inspired the St. John ensemble I wear today. The cream-colored power suit is trimmed with sparkly blue and gray embroidery along the edges of the blazer, skirt, and sleeves. I completed my look with a pair of gray satin SJP pumps accented in the back by a cute bow. It's not the sexiest thing I've ever worn, but it's hard not to notice, as Trent's reaction clearly indicates. Thirteen years my senior, he's now completely gray, but he's weathered the past few years quite nicely. His six-foot frame is fitter, and his face bears faint crow's feet and gently etched laugh lines. He rises from his seat to approach me, causing me to step back and out of his reach. He regards me with irritation at first but quickly recovers.

"Alexa, it's wonderful to see you again."

I pretend I'm not weirded out by this entire situation as he again seeks to close the distance between us. Though we'd been married for 15 years, his attraction to me had gone dormant years before our split. So, to display it now was highly unusual and even more suspicious. I lean away slightly but enough for him to notice as he bends to kiss my left cheek. He continues to study me as I retreat and take a seat at the table. I feel his attention glued to my every move.

Sam observes our interaction, disdain etched into his expression, making it clear how uncomfortable he is with Trent. Nonetheless, and ever the amiable host, Sam has his secretary bring our lunches in while he walks us through a battery of obligatory pleasantries and mindless chitchat.

"I can't get over how amazing you look," Trent murmurs, his eyes roaming me with the wonder of a pre-teen boy with a newly minted interest in the opposite sex. Because his voice is barely audible, I wonder whether he meant to speak his thoughts, which are completely unrelated to anything we've been discussing over the past minutes.

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Unmoved by the compliment, I raise my brows and glance quickly to Sam, who clears his throat. “Well, yes, I suppose she does look nice today. Now, let’s get to business. What can we do for you, Trent?”

We sit at the conference table, my cloche-covered lunch the epicenter of my attention. But I feel Trent’s eyes on me as he ignores Sam’s prompt. I’m uncomfortable under his stare, a mashup of contempt, challenge, and sexual interest, but I won’t let him know that. I sit stoically, resigned to wait him out. But his mind is stuck in place.

He allows his eyes to skim my hair, styled today in its curly, coily natural state, graze my bare shoulders, and molest my breasts before returning them to my face. Again, I raise my brows, and he offers a shrug and shoots me a wolfish grin.

“You should wear your hair like that all the time. It becomes you.”

Irony, thy name is Trent Caverton.

I draw in and exhale a breath to cleanse and tamp down the dread he inspires. I force a small smile to my lips and tap the table with my index finger to signal my growing impatience.

“As Sam said, perhaps we should get started. I have a hard stop in 50 minutes.”

Over the years, I’d learned to read Trent’s body language and silent tells with precision. Today’s context clues let me know I’ve pissed him off royally as I watch his left cheek twitch while he grits his teeth. He reaches up to stroke both temples, a telltale sign of an oncoming migraine. But the flirty thing is odd, and that’s a huge warning flare. Needing a new focus and, frankly, wanting to rattle him, I move to open the salad that sits before me and give it my full attention. As I take a few bites, I notice something new here, too. It seems he’s learned to manage his assholery somewhat, obviously holding back whatever vile retort I’d apparently inspired. He looks to Sam with his trademark impatience emblazoned on his face.

“Sam, would you give us a moment to talk in private?”

Sam and I exchange a look, which irritates Trent, but I can’t care about that. Trent wants to leverage our past personal ties, and

I'm not in the mood for the inevitable verbal sparring that's likely to ensue if I capitulate. Other people might be able to navigate safely with their exes. But after a marriage like ours, defined by challenge, deception, and his need to dominate my thoughts, wants, and emotions, I don't know if I'm capable of giving him the benefit of an open mind. There are neither safe nor untarnished spaces for him in my mended heart. So, in answer to his request, I shake my head and turn my chair slightly to his seat on my left.

"I thought your business was the purpose of your visit today, and that doesn't require us to speak privately, Trent."

He considers me for a moment. I'm so very different from the woman he married, and I'm not sure he knows how to handle that. The thought gives me a small thrill as I wait him out.

"Why are you in such a hurry, Alexa? Does seeing me again make you uncomfortable?"

My responding smile is razor sharp, much like the words that have lined up in my brain just waiting for their chance to slice their way through his Gargantuan ego. "Uncomfortable? No." I lean forward slightly to emphasize my next point. "But after four years of complete silence, it's curious and unbelievable that you're so keen to strike an accord. I get that you want my help with your campaign, and I've told you no. The fact that you persist makes me impatient and suspicious. While I'm sitting here jawing with you, I'm neglecting clients."

His answering smile is patronizing, making me want to stab him in the throat. But I tame my violent yearnings, tilt my head, and raise my eyebrows, prompting him to get on with it.

Grudgingly, he explains that SelmaTec's concept has garnered lots of interest and twice the debt. He desperately seeks a new round of funding and additional investors and hopes to attract potential buyers when the time comes. Although he's secured a new, short-term cash infusion, without a stronger, more positive name and brand, that, too, will evaporate.

"Trenton," Sam interjects, "there are plenty of firms that can help you. Why not try one of them?"

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“They don’t have your reputation.” Trent directs his reply solely to me.

“Not true,” Sam answers, steering Trent’s attention back his way. “Have you tried PCS Partners? What about Ellis Martin? Either would serve you well.”

“The other firms won’t rep us, not the good ones anyway,” he spits out, his frustration feverish and frenzied, and I’d guess he wasn’t happy having to reveal that bit of information. The man never did know how to admit when he was wrong and had even less tolerance for anyone questioning his vision. Something clicks for me with that realization, his resurfacing beginning to make some sense. Bingo.

I look to Sam, who’s remained silent as he is wont to do while soaking in the details, sights, and sounds around him. He’ll put that eidetic memory to use shortly, no doubt, at Trent’s expense. Trent knows this, too.

“I’d rather have your involvement, Alli. Is this spite? Your way of getting revenge against me?”

“You should know that’s not what I’m about, Trent. But in case you don’t realize that, I’ll be clear. This is about your work. I can’t stand behind its ethics – or yours. In some cases, I can find my way around such a situation. But in your case, I couldn’t authentically support or work with you. So, I find it’s best to stand down. I’m asking you to respect that – respect me – and do the same.” I allow my disdain to free range as I punctuate my position. “Understand I won’t be manipulated into doing anything for anyone.”

“Who are you to question my ethics or the efficacy of my work?!”

This is why it always pays to do your homework. I reach for my phone and scroll to one of the news pieces that Trey sourced.

“From February, an article in *The Atlantic* refers to you as ‘Dr. Moreau, a madman working to force freak science into the mainstream at all costs for personal gain and glory.’ Or maybe the *Scientific American* profile of you and Dick Warren, which describes you as ‘a pair of delusional, puffed up frat boys with a Weird

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Science computer program and enough soullessness to unleash their abominations on the world.' Then—"

"Enough!" Trent erupts. "Trash like that is exactly why I'm coming to you to turn this around." He slashes a hand through the air, pushing away from the table and to his feet. "You shared all that drivel with your management committee, but it's a hit job. This work is vital and sensitive, so there are certain details that need to be handled carefully. Because you know me, because you know my vision, you're the only one who can do that." He startles us both when he brings his hands to the table with force, asserting his dominance as I remain in my seat. "This is why I didn't want to rush through this conversation with you, Alli."

"Stop calling me that!"

I rise from the table now, too, his sudden show of emotion shaking my confidence slightly. I absolutely hated the nickname he'd imprinted on me. It had belonged to a distant relative who'd never cared for me. Though she loved Magdalene, the woman I called my sister, with her whole heart, she held nothing but contempt for me. To her, I was too brown, my hair too kinky, my lips too full. So yeah, you can miss me with that name, asshat. I pad behind the chair, recapturing some of my bravado as I place my hands on the seat back.

"If I give you enough time, Trent, you'll weave some incredible tale laced with malleable truths. You're hoping that I'll buy that bullshit, give in, and agree to polish up your reputation. But I can't do that. I won't stand in the firm's way of helping you if that's what they decide to do. But consider me Switzerland. I am and will remain neutral."

"Why don't you both sit back down. We're getting nowhere like this."

Sam's voice dials our emotions back, giving us a much-needed reset. I watch as Trent reclaims his seat at the table, and only then do I follow suit. Even though I know it's bad body language 101, I cross my arms and sit as far back in the seat as possible, my body's involuntary response to the threat he suggests. I tilt my head to prompt him to begin.

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“Being in business with Hedgepeth limits one’s options significantly,” Trent explains. “It doesn’t matter whether we’re separate from HedgeCo. His name taints us. And while I’m happy to remain in the background, Dick won’t have it. We need the world to hear the promise of our theories. I know you have the connections to make that happen.

“Believe me, Alexa,” he goes on after placing unnecessary emphasis on each syllable in my name, “if I could have avoided coming here, I would have. But because Storey|Fisher continues to work with Hedge, it made sense that SelmaTec would seek your counsel, too.”

“That was Sydell’s work,” I offer.

“But Hedge is still a client. It makes some sense, then, that you’d work with his outside interests, too.”

“I can’t argue with your logic,” Sam cuts in, “but that doesn’t mean that what you’re asking is the best solution – for you, Trent, or for this firm. Like Alexa said, as the firm’s managing director, she can’t afford to take on something so complex, volatile, and depending on how you look at it, unethical.”

“Then restore Sydell to the managing director position so Alexa can devote the necessary time to SelmaTec.”

Sam laughs. “You are many things, my friend, but stupid is not one of them. You don’t come in here and tell me who should run my company. And for the record, I think it would be unseemly to have your ex-wife leading your issues management. Bad form, indeed, if you truly want the reset you say you do.”

“Fair point,” Trent replies, closing his eyes. When he opens them again, his face falls into hard plains, which ironically un.masks the false calm he so desperately wants to convey.

“However, your reputation suggests a willingness to flout convention from time to time, Samson,” he recovers. “Nothing’s ever as nice and neat as we’d like it to be, now is it? I need Alexa’s guidance and input because she can understand me and get underneath the—” Trent pauses for a moment, his hand waving vaguely in the air for emphasis, “noise. You know what I’m about. I believe you can find the right way to help me get others to listen.”

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In that moment, and perhaps for the first time ever, I feel pity for Trent and his obvious lack of self-awareness. On no planet and within no realm can he believe I support him. I shake my head and stand my ground.

“I’m sorry. But again, I’m not standing in your way. If our executive team agrees, then you’ll be in great hands with Sam. Now, if there’s nothing else, there’s no sense in continuing to debate this. My decision is final.”

“Will you at least be able to consult and provide oversight if needed?”

Gotta give it up to him for his persistence. But I won’t be bullied into submission.

“I won’t need to intervene, Trent. And, if there’s nothing else, this is goodbye.”

My triumph, however, would prove to be short-lived. Despite the myriad reasons to avoid working with SelmaTec, the executive committee would allow the promise of large profits to overshadow the stench of an unredeemable character, voting later in the afternoon to welcome SelmaTec among its newest clients. I’m disappointed but not surprised, but I won’t express my views one way or the other...so long as there’s a bright, definitive line between me and my past.



A Moment with Truth

Trent Caverton’s afternoon was a lot like a day in the ballpark. He’d been prepared for and expected his homerun, but the ace slipped in some curveballs that frustrated his plans. There’s a good bit of science that explains how a curveball creates an optical illusion that takes your eyes away from what you see, training them instead on what you think you see. This might explain Trent’s anger and frustration. From where I sit, he won the day. Yet, all he perceives is his failed at-bat with his ex-wife. He’s focused on what he *didn’t* achieve.

Failure drips from his pores, stings his eyes, and beats a dull, constant cadence in his head. He was a cannibal, devouring

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anything that dared obstruct his path or purpose. But today he'd felt consumed, which would never do. The sour thoughts gnaw at him as he stands at the bathroom sink in Storey | Fischer's offices, washing his hands and gathering his thoughts.

He was too close to lose now, so he'd need to recalculate and revector his plans. His eyes scroll his image in the mirror, slowly, deliberately searching for an answer to this lingering madness. Tired of being misunderstood by those who could never grasp the depth of his vision, he regarded himself with disgust, reaching up to massage at the vise-grip threatening to ensnare his brain.

He'd had a difficult time reigning in his disdain while meeting with Storey | Fischer's executive team this afternoon. They'd been far more concerned with their reputation than with reality: by working with him, they'd enhance their reputation. They'd become an indelible part of history. What idiots!

So yes, the fact that they'd agreed to work with him was a win. But his ultimate goal demanded Alexa's support and involvement if he was to reboot his enterprise and let the world know his true genius.

"You'll need to make her see reason, and if she can't you know what to do."

The sound of Dick Warren's voice cuts his concentration, resonating as if in a tunnel.

"Stay out of this!"

Trent fired back at the rebuke, not wanting to have this conversation yet again. Never a fan of his ex-wife, Dick had always been comfortable helping Trent draw hard lines where Alexa was concerned following the couple's divorce.

"Today was a small setback. I'll get what we need. Just back off."

Trent returns his attention to his reflection, hoping his face displays the confidence necessary to keep Dick off his back. Yet, it's not enough to stop the words of contempt and disapproval from ringing through, stinging, taunting, and challenging Trent's resolve.

Chapter 16

Wednesday, October 2
Mateo

“**Y**ou in?”

I stare at the shit hand of cards I hold, my mind far away from this room.

“Da Rocha, you gonna play? Get your head in the game, man.”

I hear everything around me, but I can't be made to care. After badgering a local flower shop to get them to bend to my whims, I paid a small fortune to clear the place out, hoping a not-so-subtle peace offering might help open the door for me to grovel my way back into Alexa's good graces or at least get her talking to me. So far, though, she remains resolute in her silence. It's taken all my restraint to keep from looking at my phone every few minutes to see if she's received them.

When I don't respond to Dez Mendoza, a regular in our not-so-regular poker games, Becket nudges me, shaking me from the semi-dream state I've retreated to as I try to figure myself out. Every six weeks or whenever we can all manage to take time out, Dez, Beck, and I meet up with Bryan Vasquez, my long-time friend and business associate, to have a few cocktails, play a few hands of poker, and talk much shit. I knew I shouldn't have let Beck talk me into this. But he's been shadowing me like an

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overbearing auntie since he saw me waffling on my relationship with Alexa, insisting I do shit with him to keep myself busy and try to keep my shit in perspective. Beck has a knack for reading body language and for reading me. He'd been spot on about why I hadn't asked Alexa to attend my uncle's reception: it would look like we were together. People would question, and that would make it real. The irony in all of this was that for as much as I wanted her to be mine, I wasn't prepared for the permanence she represented. Emery's stalker tendencies combined with Janeilia's call were the perfect poison pills, effectively arresting my pursuit of Alexa with memories of the pain Janeilia caused and the crazy that pours from Emery in waves.

So, on and off over the past few days, he's offered his unfiltered insights into my relationship with Alexa after watching my behavior deteriorate. He hasn't been wrong, and he's hit more than a few nerves with his frank take down of what he says is my emotional immaturity. We both know he's trying to keep me from badgering Alexa so I can give her the space she's requested. All I know is that I'm dying a little inside as the days pass and silence is the only connective tissue between us. Uninspired and too unfazed to even try to bluff, I slam my hand down on the table.

"I fold," I say and down the rest of my bourbon. I push back from the table as Dez groans and curses me under his breath.

"What's up your ass, Da Rocha?" he shoots me an accusatory scowl. "You're a million miles away, and you look like you want to beat the crap out of someone. What gives?"

"It's nothing, Dez. Don't worry about it."

"Nah," Bryan says. "Something's up, and I'm guessing it's a woman."

"Since when does this guy ever let a woman get to him?" Dez challenges, pointing a thumb my way. "That would require sticking around long enough to learn more about her than her bra size."

The table erupts in laughter as I shoot Dez a wry look. I don't mind the ribbing. It's what we do. It's the truth in his words that gnaws at me because it's yet another reminder of how I gave my past the power to hijack my future. I gnash my teeth to keep from taking my frustrations out on these guys. That's not my style, so

no need to start being an ass to them tonight. My anxiety has nothing to do with them.

“Anybody ever tell you that you can be a douche, Mendoza?” Beck asks.

“Nah, they’re good,” I say as I walk across the room to Bryan’s bar for another bourbon. His apartment in southwest Washington, DC, overlooks the Anacostia River. I stand at the floor-to-ceiling windows for a few moments to clear my head, looking at nothing in particular in the distance. As the sun fades into the west, it fills the otherwise darkly decorated space with a soft, pink light that gives me comfort even as it amplifies my longing.

“Anyone need a refill?” I ask over my shoulder as I stare out at the nearly still, brownish-gray water. Hearing no takers, I walk a few steps to the bar and pour three more fingers of bourbon for myself before returning to the table to find Dez and Bryan staring at me.

Bryan shakes his head slowly, a smile forming on his lips. “Hell yeah, it’s a woman, probably that exotic looking chick you’ve been shuttling around northern Virginia in our cars for the past few weeks, am I right? Is that why you’re drowning your sorrows at my bar? You did something to fuck it up, didn’t you?”

He grabs for his beer and takes a long drink. I shake my head and bring the snifter to my lips. I’m not trying to have this conversation, but they’ll go harder on me if I silently take this shit.

“You have all the answers, asshole. Why don’t you enlighten us? Hmm?” I challenge, curious to see what comes back at me.

“Wait, Da Rocha’s got girl problems for real?” Dez jumps in, “Why didn’t I know this? And when do I get to meet the one woman in the world who won’t spread her legs for this *vato*?”

Bryan doesn’t miss his cue. “Look, I may not be the best authority, but I’ve never, ever known Da Rocha to give a shit about anything involving a woman much beyond how she’d look in his bed. So yeah, the math adds up. This woman has him stressed.”

“Didn’t know you paid such close attention to my private life, man,” I say. “I don’t know if you’re waiting for me to swing your

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way, but let me shut that shit all the way down right now,” I say, smirking as I draw an invisible X with my right hand for emphasis.

“Fuck all the way off, Da Rocha,” he chuckles. “You know that’s not what I’m saying.” He sits there considering me for a few moments, his eyes clear, direct. “What I know is that you’ve been acting different for a while now. I think this girl has something to do with it. You’re different when you’re with her.”

Yeah, these are my friends. At least they were. I sigh and I laugh at their ribbing.

“Think what you need to. I’m glad you’re all having so much fun. Go on, continue discussing what you think is going on in my life. Entertain me. Please.”

“Come on, Mateo, seriously. What’s up with you?” Dez presses. “You haven’t said shit. I mean, hell, we’re giving you all kinds of crap, and you’re still not talking. What’s up? You dying or something?”

I’m truly entertained now by their growing concern and curiosity. I’m also getting bored of their prying, so I cave, but only a little.

“Not sure when you assholes became a bunch of gossipy women, but no, I am not dying. And yes, there’s a woman.”

I wait for the fallout from my small admission as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I’m dragging it out as Dez plants his forearms on the table and gets ready to walk through the door I’ve reluctantly opened for him.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” he says a little too gleefully. “Come to think of it, I don’t remember the last time you even hooked up. So, what gives? You in love with this chick or something?”

I hear him but don’t answer because I need to see who’s calling. *I need it to be her.* “You guys are on a roll. While you go figure it out, I’m gonna excuse myself for a bit,” I say as I head out to Bryan’s balcony. I note the knowing look in Beck’s eyes as I head outside while the other two guys continue throwing verbal jabs my way. I couldn’t care less. By the time I get outside, I’ve missed the call. But it doesn’t matter when I see that it’s my uncle. I’ll deal with

whatever has him riled up this time once I get over my own irritation over Alexa's continued silence.

"You ready to grovel yet?"

I turn to see Beck's playful ass behind me. "Don't start, Beck," I grumble and turn to lean over the balcony as I stare out over the murky waters.

"Well, somebody needs to because it's obvious the two of you need a jolt. Somebody has to be the spark plug."

I sigh and shake my head. "It's not that easy."

He turns and considers my profile, and I brace myself for the dress down. "Isn't it? You want. Then you don't want. You ungrateful ass."

"Excuse me?" I pull myself to standing as I digest his insult.

"You heard me, Matt. You set out to make that girl trust you enough to agree to a relationship with you. Then when you break her down, you push her away because you don't have your shit together? If you remember, I warned you about this. I told you—"

"Your point?"

I know he's right, but that doesn't make hearing it any less biting. He searches my face and gives a rueful smile, as if struggling to make clear to me the simplest of ideas.

"My point is that I've tried to be a supportive friend while you self-destruct. In that spirit, it's my duty to inform you that you're a complete horse's ass if you let that woman get away because you can't get over yourself and do the very same thing you've been after her to do. That trust goes both ways, man. It's clear to anyone who's looking how she feels about you. She's not one of your bubble-headed stunts, Da Rocha. She's a beautiful, vibrant woman that you've gone and managed to fall in love with. And she loves you back. You can continue to run from that fact if you need to but do it at your own peril. I won't watch you mess it up."

I don't have the chance to reply as he turns abruptly and heads back inside. That's the thing about Beck. Although he's the very best kind of friend, his brand of honesty never goes down well – at least not at first. Perhaps that'll change if I gobble down some crow first.

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Alexa

It's Wednesday evening, the day the Winston household prepares dinner together. Each week, my schedule permitting, my kiddos and I rotate the responsibility for coming up with a fun theme for our kitchen exploits, and together, we create our dinner using that theme as our inspiration. This week, Trace has chosen a riff on *Chopped*, using refrigerated leftovers, select vegetables and pantry items, and the condiments of our choosing to produce dinner and dessert. He's added a twist, though: we'll be mashing up our culinary session with a round of *Lip Sync Battle*. It's Kanye v. Jay-Z, and because I need to keep things as PG-13 as possible, I add a proviso: no explicit versions. As expected, they grouse at that and accuse me of censorship, but whatever. I try to be cool and modern with them, but sometimes, sentences simply don't need explicit enhancement.

I survey the landscape of forgotten morsels that my foraging brood has hand selected and find chicken thighs, white rice, some sad looking broccoli florets, half of a piece of steak, and a few other odds and ends. I'm thinking Asian fusion, but far be it from me to impose my mundane palate on my mini-Gordon Ramseys. They, however, are far more invested in their pending lip sync battle than in what's for dinner. I smile to myself and sigh. It shouldn't take such great effort for me to take part in our family tradition, and after a few silent affirmations and a mental ass kicking, I dive in.

I take stock of my fresh herbs and pantry items as Tristan, wielding a spatula as his mic, launches into our first lip sync. He's chosen the radio edit of Jay-Z's *I Just Wanna Love U*, and I'm impressed but not surprised with his dive into the stacks. He enlists his brothers to lip sync the chorus and add various embellishments throughout, a move that drops these dramatic hams into their element. My heart squeezes as they have their fun enjoying the simple pleasure of being silly together. "Now give it to me," Treat mouths as Trace slides into the kitchen from the adjoining dining room to pick up the lyric. *Gimme that funk, that sweet, that nasty, that gushi stuff*. He's attempting his best Tom Cruise

impression, a la *Risky Business*, and I howl. As the oldest of the bunch, Tristan's far more in touch with his budding sexuality than his brothers, but based on the moves Trace just displayed, his 13-year-old body has its mind on some things, too. Nevertheless, they keep it clean-ish, limiting groin gyrations to just north of semi-acceptable. The boys can dance, so they rely primarily on those skills instead of their sexuality to guide their steps, and that works for me.

As the music fades, we erupt in rousing cheers, and next up is Treat. I shift my attention back to meal prep as it appears I may be competing in a culinary competition of one today. The boys remain more engrossed in the music than in cooking, and that suits me fine because it occupies my entire mind. Yes, I'm finding small comfort in the chopping, slicing, and dicing of meat, veggies, and spices for my chicken fried rice and spring rolls until the opening bars of Kanye's *Gold Digger* begin, halting me where I stand until I can determine whether little man has selected the radio edit. Annnnd he has not. His big brothers come to Treat's rescue and press pause. They dart from the room and after a brief delay to gather an air horn and a sign with the hastily scribbled word *CENSORED* scrawled across in red ink, Trace and Tristan restart the song. The responsible adult in me tries to remain neutral as the older boys distort the bad words with the obnoxiously loud air horn while Treat syncs the rap with gusto. It's funny at first as my self-styled censors miss some of the more offending words. This erupts into fits of giggles, which becomes a fight over who gets to blow the air horn, eventually devolving completely into a game of keep away with the offending noise maker. This all calls to my inner child apparently, and before I know it, I'm in on the game, chasing my guys around the kitchen island.

I'm distracted by movement on the Nest camera mounted to my kitchen wall as it displays the arrival of a visitor who I may otherwise have missed thanks to all the ruckus we're making. I wipe my hands, tell the kids to carry on, and leave our fun.

When I open the door, an expressionless man asks, "Are you Ms. Winston?" I nod and without further discussion, he trots down the steps and opens the back doors of his white panel truck,

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revealing an array of floral arrangements. He returns to my front door bearing two massive bouquets of white flowers. “Where do you want ‘em?” he asks, and I’m so tongue tied that I can only motion for him to enter as I point to the study on the left of my foyer.

He places them on either corner of my desk and tells me he’ll be back inside with the rest of my delivery. *The rest?*

When he’s finished, I’m surrounded by seven enormous bouquets of stunning white and pink flowers. The scent of gardenias, calla lilies, Boule de Neige roses, delicate paperwhites, and pink camellias captivates me as their smells comingle, wafting through my space and drenching it in an intoxicating fragrance. Their bright light casts magnificent halos of light and warmth, blanketing my home office – and my heart – with a new, calmer energy. I don’t have to ask who sent them, and as I stand there in shock, the feelings of regret that I’ve been forcing into submission for the past week and a half wash over me for having ignored my heart’s urging to remain open to Mateo. My heart fills with a profound need for him as I root around for the vase bearing a card. I retrieve it but will have to wait to read it as I’m joined by three inquiring minds. I slip it protectively into a back pocket of my jeans as the inquisition begins.

“Who died?” Trace asks as the boys come to inspect what’s going on. I whip around to see three faces grinning teasingly at me. I try to school my expression but apparently fail miserably as Tristan points an accusatory finger my way.

“They’re from a guy, aren’t they?” He nods knowingly as the smile that wants out of me plasters itself in place.

“Yes,” I answer truthfully as I shake my head. “But I haven’t had a chance to read the card because you goons are all up in my business.”

“Does this mean that guy you’ve been hanging out with is your boyfriend, mom?” Trace probes, his expression full of wonder and intrigue.

“She’s a mom,” Treat answers incredulously. “How can she have a boyfriend, stupid?”

“Shut up, doof,” Trace retorts, “Of course she can have a boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I answer, but the words feel wrong on my lips. *Is he?*

Tristan eyes me for a moment and purses his lips. “It’s not like you’re old or anything. You’re pretty, you’re kind. You’re fucking awesome, man. I can see some guy wanting to go out on dates with you.”

“Maybe they’re from dad,” Treat offers, drawing angry scowls from his brothers. Trace slices a hand through the air, shakes his head no, and crosses his arms over his chest while Tristan spells things out for his siblings.

“Hell, no they’re not. No way they could be because we don’t fuck with him.”

“Language, Tristan!” I scold and needing to regain control of this exchange I say, “I assure you that these are not from him.” *Are they?* I clear my throat as much to rid myself of panic as to reroute the conversation. “Now, how about you let me tend to my business while the three of you mind yours. Let’s go back into the kitchen so I can finish this dinner you’re not helping me to prepare.”

Thinking I can defuse their cross examination, I turn to head back into my kitchen but feel Tristan pull the unread note card from my pocket. He slips past me as I swipe at him, trying but failing to reclaim the ivory cardstock from his hands. After reading it, he holds up a hand to halt me, a knowing smile spreading across his face.

“Ok. Three things,” he says, motioning to a stool at the kitchen island. “You may want to have a seat for this, Mom.” When I don’t move immediately, he gives me raised eyebrows, his imitation of a look I’m sure I’ve thrown his way many times over his young life. I smile and take my seat, and he goes all in.

“First, you let no one, and I mean no one, call you Lexi other than Uncle Sam, so there’s that. Two, this is definitely some kind of grand gesture from a guy who messed up big. I have no idea what flowers cost, but this is a lot. Like a whole flower shop is in the next room. And, finally, I don’t remember when I ever saw

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you blush until a few minutes ago. Ergo, I'd say you have a boyfriend, or at least someone who wants to be," Tristan intuits from whatever Mateo has written on the card. I stalk over to him, embarrassed and shaken, to rip the parchment from his hands and hold it to my chest. I'm not mad, of course, but I'm not exactly comfortable with his shining light on my infantile love life.

"What do you know about grand gestures, genius?" I challenge, my brain choosing to seize upon that slight detail as I tuck away his much-too-astute insights for further examination once I'm alone.

"Think about that girl movie from your time, um, what's it called? That one where the guy who has the eyes like a rat hires a prostitute on a business trip and falls in love with her?"

"I think you're referring to *Pretty Woman*, son, and the actor's name is Richard Gere," I offer.

"Yep!" he points at me, "that right there. That may have introduced the grand gesture as the best way to show a girl how you feel after you've messed up, but Millennials took it to a whole other level. Why do you think every teen girl walking expects a dramatic promposal, or that you'll plan a surprise birthday party and invite all her friends, go to all the trouble of planning picnics in the park, all that stuff? It's simply a part of the culture now. And that," he adds, pointing to the room where my blooms reside, "screams grand gesture."

My young philosopher's words take root in my heart, which apparently is far more open to this logic than my mind. Still afraid of what the words on the card might reveal, I slowly bring it to eye level.

Lexi: I miss you. It's killing me not talking to you. Just hear me out. That's all I ask. -M

And there it was. Simple. To the point. I inhale a shaky breath and look up to find three pairs of eyes trained on me, eagerly awaiting my reaction.

"This dinner isn't going to cook itself, gentlemen. Now if you'll excuse me," I say, trying to change the subject until I can have time to myself to think.

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“We got this, mom,” Trace replies, “come on T,” he says to his big brother, “you, too, Tiny T,” he adds, pointing to Treat. “Let’s do this and give Mom some time to handle her business.”

“Stop calling me that, butt face,” Treat spits back at Trace, but Tristan subdues him, shaking his head and grabbing his younger brother by the neck to calm his objections.

“It’s fine, Trace,” I protest, “tonight’s family time—”

“We can eat together once dinner’s ready,” Tristan chimes in. “We’ll be fine in the kitchen on our own. Now go. Handle your business, dear leader, while we finish what you started while we were screwing off.”

I laugh but see these boys aren’t playing as they turn to pick up the dinner preparations. Left to my own devices, I take their advice and go off to figure out my next move.

As I sit at my desk for a time, allowing myself to enjoy the sight and scent of Mateo’s peace offering, my mind begins replaying images from the past several months. Sharing ordinary things with Mateo. Discussing the random happenings of the day. Laughing and finding freedom in being silly. Enjoying time in each other’s space without having to script or choreograph each moment as we grew to understand what makes the other tick. My attraction to him was layers deep and multi-dimensional. Was the man seriously fine? Of course! Did being around him make my heart race? Undoubtedly. But beyond that, well beneath the physical attraction, I’ve allowed him into a space deep inside of me that no one before has ever successfully occupied. Maybe no one has ever really tried? It was this idea that set him apart in my head and heart. More important, I know I’m not alone in this. How much does it matter that the man my heart knows is not the man I shared time with the last few times we were together? It’s time to figure it out, so I lean forward and slide open the desk drawer to retrieve my phone. Moments later I see an incoming FaceTime call from Sage. I haven’t been answering his calls either, but as this fog of depression and doubt begins to lift, I realize it’s time to face my friends, my frustrations, and my fears.

“Mr. Vanucci, to what do I owe the honor?”

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“Alexa, you wound me! A man gets busy. And besides, last I checked, you told me to leave you the hell alone.”

“Guilty, but that’s never stopped you before. How ya been?”

“How’ve I been? If you gave a fuck you might have returned a call or two. Question is, how are you?”

I sigh and fix a smile to my face. “I’m fine, Sage. I needed some time and space to work through my emotional junk. Especially when you go all protective on me. You know that.”

“Well, that’s kind of the reason for my call, sweets. How are you doing with everything? I know I haven’t exactly been on board with your chemical romance, but it’s because I don’t want to see you hurt again.”

And there it was. The problem with sharing your hurts, concerns, and frustrations over a guy with a friend or loved one. The long memory of a true friend is often loathe to forget the perpetrator’s infraction. But the heart wants what it wants despite what others may think, say or do. I may not be fully comfortable with the fact that my heart wants Mateo Da Rocha with a profound yearning, but it may be too late to do anything about that. I’m powerless to resist the man any longer. So, I’ll have to take a chance and pray for the best.

“So, what’s the latest with you and Don Quixotic?”

I chuckle at his word play. “Have you been playing with your dictionary app again, Vanucci? And you know that’s low-key racist, right?”

Sage barks a hearty laugh. “Give me some credit here, buttercup. I run one of the most respected newspapers in the free world. I know how to use my words, and I’m nobody’s racist. I may just have found an occasion to use a recent word of the day, but I’m pretty sure that’s damn well on point. The man is more hopeful than a puppy and as dreamy as a teenage girl. So, have you heard from him?”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer. Sage didn’t trust Mateo, and I won’t fan those flames of distrust any further. I don’t need any more angst, so, I decide to punt.

“Why would you ask? Last time we talked—”

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“The last time we talked,” he interrupts, “you didn’t want me to know how upset you were over whatever fight the two of you had.”

“And as I recall,” I dive in, “you decided to lay out for me all the reasons it was silly to think we could have a relationship. That’s why I hung up on you.”

He sighs and says, “Yeah, I was a dick to you. I can admit that. But it’s easy to see—”

“—that you’re a dick. I love your self-awareness. Thanks for clarifying.”

“Touché, *tesoruccio*.” His lighthearted chuckle brings back my easy smile. “Now don’t make me take a run at you for real. Just go on and tell me what’s new with you and your Sweet Babboo.”

I giggle at the childish reference and sigh. As usual, Sage chomps down on a storyline like a pit bull in attack mode once he finds your exposed places. I close my eyes, shake my head, and dive in.

“I’m not sure why you think I have a story to tell but check this out.”

I move the phone to pan the flower-covered surface of my desk and hear Sage whistle in appreciation.

“Dayum,” he drawls, nodding his head in appreciation. “I see somebody grovels well. Nicely done, Da Rocha. And so, what’s next?”

“I was sitting here trying to think things through when you called, so I’m not sure yet. We’ll just have to see what, if anything, develops.”

“See what develops?” Sage apes, his voice a mix of amusement and mild indignation. “The fuck does that mean? *Develops?*” He huffs out a laugh then proceeds to dissect my bullshit. “Look, hate to break it to you, but shit developed and got all lusted over a minute ago. It was around the time you two were in a room together for the first time. That’s when I’m pretty sure that your pheromones fucked his pheromones at first sight, but don’t take my word for it. Ask anyone. The whole world can smell the chemicals between you. So yep, I think you’re well past the pupal stage.”

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“Fuck all, Vanucci! Have I ever told you how much of an ass you are?” I should have been mad, but this is what Sage does best. He reads your position and then takes you right up to the line, mirror in hand, to face your reality. “And what is it with you and the alt rock references today?”

“I’m witty, chickie. You know I’m right, and if the lyric fits...”

With any exasperation burning off before it really has a chance to simmer, I’m struck by how Sage always puts me at ease, despite the infuriating back-and-forth banter he inspires. The man also knew how to weaponize extended silence, I remember too late, as he goes quiet for too long. This was another of Sage’s weird social ticks. He used extended silence to creep out the person on the receiving end so they’d break the silence first, awkwardly, and defensively, catching them so off-guard that they spill some info best left unsaid.

Determined to out-silence him, I stare into the camera, my eyes locked with his, his on me.

“Ok. Fine. Keep your little secrets. But you know as well as I do that you overthink things. I just don’t think you two are done with each other.”

“And how could you possibly know that?”

Again, with the extended silence. This time, though, I take something else from his pregnant pause as well as the increasingly sheepish look on his face, so I push him.

“Sage, why would you say that? What aren’t you telling me?”

He expels a harsh breath, and I brace myself for whatever it is he’s dancing around.

“Hypothetically, ok, let’s say we ran into each other a few days ago. Let’s say, too, that I can tell you without a doubt in my mind that the guy is completely gone over you and knows he fucked something up. What, I can’t say. But if I were you, I’d hear him out. Then, when you have it all figured out, you can fuck each other’s brains out and see what develops.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Sage, what have you done?”

“Nothing, Alexa. Nothing bad anyway. But anyone who cares about you can see you’re spiraling.

“I’m hanging up now, Vanucci. Goodbye.”

“No, hold on a minute. Step back and think things through. Hear him out, honey. You can’t decide what you want until you do that, you know?”

The sincerity in his voice and the compassion in his eyes rip into me. His words rub me raw, but I don’t want him to know that. Though the past week and a half has been agonizing and disconcerting if I factor in Trent’s return to the surface, I needed time to reconcile my feelings for Mateo with my reasons for making this emotional retreat.

“Thanks, Sage,” I answer simply, and I try to look upbeat. “Appreciate the pep talk, man.”

“That’s why I’m here. Take care of yourself, Alexa.”

Mateo

After letting Beck run around in my head for a bit longer, I settle back into our poker night and the endless death-of-a-bachelor jokes being lobbed my way. Becket cuts me a side-eye or two, and I let him see what he’s looking for: signs that I’ll take his advice and get over myself. I’m contrite and a bit more lighthearted as I return a diss or two and beat the living shit out of Dez and his young bank account for a couple of hands. I guess he sees what he needs to see as he relaxes and turns his attentions back to whatever banality Bryan is talking about.

I hesitate at first when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, not sure I’d be able to hide my disappointment if it’s not Alexa. I excuse myself and head back out to the balcony where I can be at least reasonably assured that I don’t have an audience. When I see that it was, in fact, her, I dial her back rather than to listen to her message. She answers on the second ring.

“Mateo. Hi,” she answers, and I immediately hate the tentative sound in her voice.

“It’s good to hear your voice, Alexa.”

“Well, I wanted to thank you for the flowers. They’re lovely. But, um, it’s a lot, you know.”

Her laugh is small and cautious, but there’s no rebuke or judgment in her voice. I hear her amusement, and that’s a good thing.

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“No need for thanks, love. I’m glad you like them.”

I wait for her to say more because I know this woman, and I’ll wait as long as it takes for her to say what she needs to. I feel a grateful calm rush over me at that realization.

“I do,” she finally says, “and thank you again for giving me this space to think.”

“Again, love, no need to thank me.” I wait a minute but can’t help myself. “Lex?”

“Yeah?”

“Let me see you. I miss the hell out of you, love.”

For a moment, I wonder if I’ve gone too far when her response doesn’t come immediately. The eventual “me, too” she offers in response is quietly hopeful. I stand there for a few moments enjoying the mix of relief and anticipation as they wash away the emotional turmoil of the past week and a half. Once I’m feeling settled and steady, I take the next step in putting us back to right.

“Will you have dinner with me tomorrow so we can finally talk everything through?”

She doesn’t immediately respond, making me wonder if she’s still on the line. When she finally, quietly, agrees, I let go of the breath I didn’t know I was holding and stand there enjoying this relief for a few moments before heading back into the room to sit down to another round. I grab the deck of cards and ask who’s in. I take more abuse from my guys as the night goes on, but that’s ok now that I know I’ll have the chance to repair what I broke between me and my girl.

Chapter 17

Thursday, October 3
Alexa

The press scents blood in the waters that Hedge treads. But, because I have our best and smartest people on tap to manage the media's inquest, our firm has managed to stay ahead of the negative stories waiting to hit the presses and bomb the airwaves. I'm grateful for that as I enter the offices of the *Washington Post* for the editorial board meeting Hedge insisted that I schedule. This will mean an official end to radio silence as the media chatter begins.

As a rule, I don't advise clients to take this path. Each member of the edit board has full reign to explore an individual agenda, so the ideas you bring to the table aren't necessarily the ones you'll see reflected in the editorial pages if or when the paper decides to take a position on the issue. Keeping your client on message is a huge part of being able to control the narrative. That's not so easy to do when the client lets his feelings embellish the script, which Hedge almost always does.

I've never been one to stress for too long, so as I stand at the elevator bay, I take stock of all the good things. On the one hand,

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not everyone can leverage a forum like this. I rarely call on my friendship with Sage in this way, but never have I been so happy to have our connection. Energy exploration is a hot and controversial topic, and the fact that we alone have this access is a win. Hedge's seemingly irreverent take on the matter makes it that much more on trend. But that's also the biggest risk we take. Hedge and his mouth are wild cards on a good day. Being the attack dog that he is, Sage will use this weakness against Hedge as a lever to pry open some seemingly tangential issue to rile him up and drive him off message. Add to that the fact that although he may not have said so, Sage has a hard on to out Hedge's reported bad deeds. This is the knowledge that informed my prep sessions with Hedge. But the man is largely untrainable, and that's his failing – not mine. He preferred to bluster and brag about how he would command the interview instead of listening to my counsel to watch Sage carefully, keep his mouth and ego in check, and always find his way back to the topic of energy efficiency. Sydell, of course, worked hard to counter my advice by encouraging his insolent, brash nature to take to the stage when faced with questions he'd rather not address. The jury remains out on whose lessons stuck.

Because the media holds the unmatched power to shape thought, its practitioners should handle it reverently. Those outside of the profession love to demand objectivity when they don't see their views reflected, or more often, when those views are skewed by advocacy for one side or the other. But because we are humans first, we come fully loaded with inner convictions and personal truths that play a role in shaping the way we report what we see and learn. Knowing this, the job of news gatherers is clear: present a fair assessment of a situation through keen, well-reported perspectives, intelligent voices, and multiple viewpoints to create a clear, complete picture, despite whatever your personal views and convictions.

With this in mind, I try to leave my voice off the PR soundtrack whenever possible. I have no strong need to see my name in print or my face on TV, and unless strictly necessary, a spokesperson is best kept to the background, pulling the strings and manipulating

the medium to the client's benefit. Today promises to test me and my high ideals should Sage pursue questions about the many accusations against my client. I don't like Hedge. Yet, he's a client of the firm and for that reason only – or perhaps for that reason above all – he deserves the best representation I can provide. The elevator announces my arrival, and I tuck my skittering thoughts away as I exit.

For nearly two hours, I sit with Hedge as Sage and his editorial staff explore topics from his offshore drilling aspirations to insider trading. He stays close on message when asked his thoughts on the local environmental debacle he created off the Virginia coastline. He even manages to appear contrite in his explanation of how he plans to invest his personal resources to help restore the region's ecosystem. I'm guessing his answers addressing the low-key, but likely quite true, rumbles of insider trading will bring those accusations at least to neutral, so I'll count this as a win as well. In all, I'm pleasantly surprised and strangely relieved that he keeps so closely to his lines – until he doesn't.

"Hedge," Sage begins, putting me on high alert as he rips his glasses from his face and leans back in his chair, "I'd like to change course if that's ok with you."

No way is Sage asking permission but rather daring Hedge to throw out a reason why he shouldn't. Hearing none, Sage opens his query.

"Not much is known about you outside the board room. And I'm curious about a few things."

Hedge nods, and I see his muscles tense. It's a slight reaction, but after hours of coaching him to prepare for today's meeting, I've learned to read his body language. I don't like what I see.

Sage's first few questions are innocuous enough. How would you describe your business style? What's the biggest factor in your success? Who are your heroes? Hedge relaxes as he speaks about his favorite subject: himself. I notice, and so does Sage, so I brace for the all in.

"Hedge, how would people describe you?"

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Hedge digs right in, his puffery evident in the joy of sharing his accolades. When he's finished, Sage raises his brows, returns his glasses to his face and consults his tablet.

"Good," he praises, "I guess that's one view. However, in preparation for our meeting today, I had the opportunity to talk with a few people to help me get a sense of what makes you tick. Many of them seem to have a different perspective, and I'd like to share some of that now for your reaction." The smile on Sage's face is as sharp as the axe he's about to drop. "'Wilson Hedgepeth rose to prominence through a system that disregards merit and intellectual fitness in favor of influence.' According to another of your business associates, 'Like any other dinosaur of a man, he takes as he sees fit, whether it be in business or his personal life. He is a dark, depraved, amoral and soulless (expletive deleted), but because he has every—'"

"Enough! Tell me who the hell would say these things!"

Sage holds up a hand and presses on. "...fixer you can think of on his payroll, his dirt gets heaped on a dunghill. It never gets to see the light of day.' Now, you were saying?"

Hedge's face matches the scarlet dress I slipped on this morning as he scowls at Sage. "You tell me now where you got that crap! And if you put that in print—"

"Stop it, Hedge. Now," I say and lean over and low talk him like I would a defiant child, the threat in my hissed words clear. He's seething but quiet for now as I move to do the thing I enjoy the least.

"Let's go on background for a moment, Sage," I say, making up the way forward as I try to divert this certain train wreck. "It's not in Hedge's best interests to reply to anonymous take downs like this. You certainly can understand how hearing such opinions might be upsetting. Perhaps you can frame your intent more specifically so he can offer a relevant, thoughtful reply."

And I cringe because that's bullshit; I don't really care if Hedge burns in hell. My client and my convictions are at odds as I knew they inevitably would be at some point this afternoon. I won't war with myself over it, but I need to set aside my feelings and minimize their damage.

“It’s fine, honey,” Hedge offers, patting me on the hand as he would a child lacking the agency to intervene or solve a problem without adult help. “Mr. Vanucci, if you’re in this business long enough, you’re bound to create enemies. I say it’s all part of the game because nobody enjoys your success when they’re not getting a slice of that pie. They can’t deny or dismantle the fact that I always win, so they do the next best thing, which is to attack. I say the more enemies the better. Means I must be doing something right.”

He sits back in his chair, self-satisfied in his reply as he wraps his arms across his chest and rests them on his protruding belly. The corners of his mouth turn down slightly but enough to convey his obvious discomfort with this unfortunate but expected turn of fortune. He’d dismissed my consistent warnings to be prepared for hostile fire and was now dealing with the fallout in real time. His posture screams defiance and insecurity, and I know that Sage will see it, too. This just keeps getting better.

Also as expected, Sage allows one of his pregnant pauses to fill the stillness of the room. Just as he would have it, the room is hanging on his next words. I’ve seen the Sage show before, and this is simply the overture.

“It’s safe to say, then, that you’re comfortable in criticism, that you don’t expect to win friends,” Sage remarks.

Hedge’s face is deadpan, carefully blanked of all expression even as his energy vibrates palpably, daring Sage to press forward.

“Right then. Much of my reporting supports the fact that these enemies as you call them aren’t taking issue with your business practices. Their real issue lies in whether you’re morally fit to lead a multi-national enterprise.”

“Do you have a question, Vanucci?” Hedge’s words are clipped and drenched with warning.

Sage places his tablet on the table, leans forward, and meets Hedge’s angry stare with challenge. “There are serious allegations against you indicating that you engage in certain behaviors that abuse and endanger underage girls. How do you respond to that?”

Clearly, Sage hasn’t shared his findings with the other editors in the room, who sit mystified and captivated by the allegations.

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I'm certain that I hear Hedge's teeth grinding though he remains too still, his gaze locked on my tenacious, determined friend.

"What do you say to reports that you've used your influence to kill stories that would reveal these allegations?"

"Look, you're naïve if you think morality and business coexist in black and white terms. I make a lot of money, for myself and for many others. Show me the person who thinks that's a bad thing, and I'll show you someone who wishes they had even a tenth of what I have."

"Is that a no comment? Are you denying that on multiple occasions, you've drugged and had sex with underage girls?"

"I think we're done here, Vanucci. What you should focus on is the fact that I have answers that can position this nation to be a leader in the mining and creation of traditional and sustainable energy. We need solutions. Instead, you want to sit here and level outrageous, unprovable allegations. Call me when you're ready to move on."

With wafer-thin patience and a rage barely contained, Hedge pushes back from the conference table and offers a curt nod at no one in particular.

"Now, if you'll all excuse me," he huffs and moves to exit the room.

At this point, when nail meets coffin, I stare at the closed door for a moment before moving on to try and right this capsized vessel. "All right, then. Give it to me straight. I need to know what my client can expect going forward."

"Normally, you know I wouldn't promise anything one way or the other," Sage begins, clearly sympathetic to my untenable position, "so I'll just say we'll see how it writes. I will tell you that I think we have enough to write substantively about Hedgepeth, his business dealings, and these fucked up allegations and fill several different issues. Come on, Alexa, it wasn't that long ago when you played for our team, before you crossed over to the dark side to become an image goddess. What else would you do in our position?"

"You read me wrong, Sage," I correct him quickly. "I'm not going to try to tell you your business or extract a commitment one

way or the other. And I'm torn about doing damage control here. Your reporting informs your line of questioning, and I respect you and your staff for that. But it *is* my business to manage my client's expectations around what comes next."

"Is there any thing you'd like to add on your client's behalf?"

The question comes from an associate editor sitting to my right who's been mostly silent until now. But I see it for the bone that it is. Question is, do I want to pick up these scraps at all?

"Hedge is determined to press ahead with his vision with little regard for how the optics of his moves look or affect others. Some might call that dedication. Off record, he isn't going to win any popularity contests. He knows that and gives no fucks. Nevertheless, I trust you'll offer balanced, thoughtful coverage, regardless of which aspects you choose to write. I'm happy to provide any clarification you may need regarding the facts to the best of my ability."

I move to gather my things, my skin feeling too tight and my mind now turned off to any additional talk about Hedge. As I stand to leave, the others do as well, offering perfunctory thank yous and handshakes. Sage walks with me to the door and pulls me into an embrace.

"I'll bet it sucks to be you right now, *tesoruccio*," he whispers for my ears only. When he releases me, his smile is pained and full of pity. "For what it's worth, you're a rock star. Talk soon."



After the day I've had, I'm both eager and apprehensive about seeing Mateo this evening. But I tuck away my fears along with the remains of the stressful day as I head downstairs to meet the car he's sent for me. Hedge was furious when I found him waiting in the lobby, but he had sense enough not to show it. He'd unwittingly sourced a few stories with his glib replies and defiant body language. God forbid he provide any additional fodder that could paint him with an even blacker brush.

As we walk towards the exit, he taps out a message to summon his driver and manages to hiss accusations my way.

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“Did you set me up for that ambush, Alexa?!”

I assure him that he’s insane to think such a thing and that I’d done what damage control I could. I remind him, too, that as I’d suspected and warned him, he took a risk in taking this meeting and in doing so, he’d probably complicated his life in ways he could never imagine. I know that with certainty. But I’ll have to deal with and prepare him for that some other time.

A grunt his only reply, he disappears through the doors and to the right to meet his driver. I exhale my relief, try to pull together my thoughts, and focus on the evening ahead. That’s when I realize just how nervous I am, so I’m glad I didn’t have a chance to sit and obsess today. Over the past few days, I’ve held up a mirror to my emotions and I didn’t like what I saw. As someone who considers herself self-aware, I’m surprised and disappointed by the ugly scars and closed-off spaces that I’ve discovered. What I once regarded as emotional armor is as responsible for what happened – or didn’t happen – between Mateo and me over the past few weeks as he is. I’m a victim to my past, enslaved by a torrent of fears and what-ifs that have kept me in place, stunting and stalling out any forward progress. The emotional safe space I’ve painted around myself is artifice, fooling me into a sense of satisfaction and keeping me from enjoying the fullness of life, too afraid to take a chance and increasingly bitter because of it.

Yes, Trent’s cruel attitude and indifference was the macro cause of our breakup, but my conflict avoidance was as complicit. You can’t resolve issues when you’re not willing to fight them out. I’m peaceful by nature, so when something angered my ex-husband, I’d seek ways to soothe the frenzy, often trying to offer an alternative, more positive view to help restore his peace and calm, whether or not it suited my needs to do so. I didn’t necessarily seek to understand it or him, though, a fact that, in Trent’s eyes, reflected self-absorption or self-interest instead of a commitment to our partnership and even more so to peace.

For me, angry words between partners create unforgiving craters, swallowing and trapping the good things and replacing them forever with pain and anger. There could be no escape from the chasm as it drew you deeper into despair, daring you to find

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an escape to normalcy. That emotionally stunted view blanketed me in hopelessness for most of our marriage. I'm a portrait of emotional immaturity, and unless I add color and dimension to this canvass by opening myself to the good *and* bad in my relationships, I'll remain trapped inside gray, muted experiences and tentative, lackluster interactions.

Well-armed with my foundational truths, I've resolved to find my way forward with Mateo. As the sun begins to fade, so do my reservations about the man I now know and will admit I cannot do without. I let that sink in as my car pulls to the curb.

I exchange pleasantries with my driver and settle into my seat more determined than ever to experience the fullness of my budding emotional spring. But vibrations from my smart phone shake me from my thoughts. I don't immediately recognize the number and grimace when I answer to find Trent on the line.

"You certainly have been tough to catch."

I sigh and force myself to be cordial. "Trent. I have lots going on. What did you need?"

He huffs and it's haughty and oh-so like the man who worked tirelessly to control the way I thought, felt, and behaved for more than a decade.

"I need you to stop being so suspicious of me," he says sighing wearily. "I'm doing my best to try and have a civil conversation with you, to catch up on the years that I missed, and you're blocking me at every turn."

The line goes quiet for the next few moments, and I say a silent prayer that the call has dropped or that he decided to hang up. Sadly, neither is the case.

"But I need you to take the time to hear me out. I think it'll change your perspective on working with me. I thought we could do that over dinner."

I almost throw up in my mouth, repulsed by his full-court press, but I manage to keep my voice neutral as I stand in my resolve to handle my business in real time.

"I'm sorry, but I already have plans."

"Perhaps you should reschedule. What I have to say is important."

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“Clearly you believe that. But I can’t change my plans. I have just a few moments now, so just put it out there. What is it you want?”

“Have dinner with me and you’ll see.”

I close my eyes and consider this carefully as I sift through the words that I need to say, the ones he needs to hear the most. I need him to feel my conviction until it courses through his veins and recasts his thoughts.

“My life is good now. Finally. I’m going to keep it that way. That means steering clear of the complications that always seem to follow you around.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“It means what you think it does, Trent. Things are better in my life without you in it. I want it to stay that way. Our divorce gave me back my heart and my soul, and I’ll never risk them again – especially not with or for you. So, I don’t think that spending time with you serves any good purpose.”

“My word,” he laughs, condescension dripping from the corners of his words, “you’re so very different now. Kinda feisty. I think I like it.”

“I like me, too. And since there’s apparently nothing else?”

“Alli,” he purrs into the phone, making me flinch, “just hear me out. Let me make amends. Say I’m sorry for the way I handled everything.”

Impatient and edgy now, I shoot back, “No need, Trent. Now, I need to get on with my evening. Whatever you need, I’m sure Sam is more than capable of providing.”

With that, I end the call and scramble to collect my wits and calm my frazzled nerves. My timing is perfect as the car rolls to a stop, and I see Mateo waiting for me, engrossed in something on his phone. I know I’ll need to follow up and deal with Trent, but I can’t be bothered with him tonight. Our pasts, mine and Mateo’s, have had enough influence over us, and it’s high time we lived in our truth and in the present if we hoped to have the future we both seem to want together.

As his eyes find mine, we make our silent reconnection, and I take a deep breath, stuffing away my anxieties as best as I can as I

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prepare to step into the unknown. I focus my attention on the possibilities ahead. We may not be close enough to have an actual conversation. But as always, we consume the main courses with our eyes, savoring the tenderness between us, devouring each other's souls, growing sated on the notes of promise that season each glance. We share words over dessert.

When I climb from the car, Mateo rushes over to draw me in for a hug, longing and desire clouding his stormy gray-green eyes, making me forget all about the troll lying in wait to reclaim some part of my soul. His lips dust mine with the lightest of kisses, a small but potent gesture that stirs up everything that I'm feeling and need to say to him. The good *and* the bad. And holy fucking hell, I think I might have moaned just now. Damn! Despite my best efforts to keep my cool, I can feel my cheeks heating to what must be a scarlet blush.

"Let's go," he says, taking full command of us both as he places his hand at the small of my back and steers us down the street.

I look to him and smile, letting my silence say what I can't seem to. And, of course, he hears me.

Small talk passes between us as we walk the few blocks towards his intended destination, which, at first blush, is unremarkable from the outside. I'm grateful for these moments as I reset my mind and focus on our night ahead.

Our destination is set back slightly from the road, the entrance well hidden by an eerily dark flight of steps that empties into a dimly lit yet welcoming main entrance. The warm, traditional early Mexican décor that greets me puts me immediately at ease as I scan the beautifully tiled accents along the mustard, orange, and gray-blue pallet of the walls and furnishings. What appears as little more than a hole in the wall from the outside reveals an impressive expanse of rooms situated in labyrinth style, making it an interesting temptation to get lost within the maze of dining rooms, bars, and dance floors. Out of the ether it seems, a young, well-quaffed and well-cultured host welcomes us, greeting Mateo by name and bowing humbly and respectfully to me. Though my Portuguese is primitive, I pick up enough of the exchange to

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determine that our host's name is Cristiano and that his boss has arranged a team of servers dedicated to us throughout the evening.

"*Bem-vindo a La Joya Brasileira!*" Welcome to the Brazilian Jewel!

"*Muita obrigado,*" I manage, thanking him and drawing a look of deep appreciation from Mateo.

"*Voce fala portugues?*" Mateo asks with expectation.

"Sadly, no. A phrase here and there, and I can understand some words I hear. But this is about as deep as my conversational Portuguese goes."

Before he has the chance to reply, I'm startled by the booming voice that reaches out to me well before the speaker to which it's attached. I turn uneasily to find a short, round woman with a kind face, smiling eyes, and a little too much enthusiasm.

"I am Mariana! And you must be Alexa."

What was certainly intended to be a reassuring pat on the back feels more like a solid thwack that may have separated my shoulder. I extend my hand and offer a quiet hello and a smile. Mariana accepts my hand, placing her own warm, plump mitt on top of mine.

"It's so nice to meet you, *docinha*. This is my place. Well, thanks to this one right here," she says, acknowledging Mateo for the first time. "Anything you want or need, anything at all is on me tonight. Now come! And if this fool doesn't treat you right, you just let me know, and I'll knock sense into him!"

"*Sim, eu também te amo,*" Mateo replies with affection as he plants a hard kiss to the jolly woman's cheek, making me wonder at the interesting exchange and familial banter between them. She swats at his chest in reply and starts down what appears to be an even darker path to nowhere, lit solely by diffused beams peeking in from other areas of the bar and by strategically placed lighting sconces along the walls. My anxiety ratchets up once more as we enter the dining area. I move woodenly towards a high-backed stool at the ornate chestnut bar and perch myself there as I take a good look around for the first time. My nerves snap to life as I assess what's around me. It's well after 6 p.m. It's Thursday night, and we're the only two here.

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“There’s no one else here,” I state the obvious, struggling to muster a swallow to wet my suddenly dry throat.

“No. No, there’s not.” He smirks, watching my expression change from confusion to recognition as I process the fact that we’re completely alone in a semi-cavernous room for the evening.

“Why—”

“Because you tend to use people watching as a means of deflecting my attention from you sometimes.” He takes ahold of the seat beside me, moves it closer to my own, and leans an elbow on the bar.

“That’s not true!”

“It is and you know it. But this way,” he says as he reaches for my hand and kisses my right knuckles, “we have no choice but to talk to and focus on each other or risk a really awkward evening.”

My hand still in his, I give it a gentle squeeze before pulling back, albeit reluctantly.

“Looks like you thought of everything, huh?”

I fight hard to control my blooming grin to no avail. He shrugs his shoulders and chuckles, shaking his head at my ridiculous behavior. We sit there for several beats while my mind races from thought to thought.

“Seriously, what did you do, Mateo?” It’s only then that I remember what Mariana said when we entered. “How do you clear an entire restaurant?”

His expression turns serious, and something else, too. Maybe sheepish? He inhales as though he’s preparing to drop some bombshell, and I narrow my eyes, not sure what I expect he’ll say.

“Not hard to do when you’re part owner.”

“Huh?” is all I can manage because that’s definitely not what I expected to hear.

I learn that Mateo provided most of the seed money to a small group of restaurateurs to open this place. He’s a silent partner, deferring the management and oversight responsibilities to Mariana and her brothers. I’m struck not by what he’s sharing but by how reluctantly he tells his story. Though he refers to himself as “part” owner, it’s clear that there would be no *La Joya Brasileira*

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but for his generosity. I can only hope that the total adoration I feel for him shows on my face.

“There are so many layers to you, it seems, Da Rocha. I am so impressed by you right now.”

“Don’t be,” he’s quick to advise. “These are good people who had a dream. I just made it easier for them to see it come true.”

I want to know more, but because he’s obviously not comfortable talking about himself in this way, I stand down but not before making copious notes in the margins of my mind to explore why he’s continued to hold this part of himself away from me.

“So, how about we set some ground rules?” he suggests, and I raise my brows in surprise at his abrupt change of subject. “I have three. First, I need you to relax.”

I don’t bother to deny what he clearly sees. “I’m working on that,” I say.

“Good girl.” His eyes lock onto mine as he takes my hand once more. I feel my core clench as the attraction between us comes out to play. “Next up, stop hiding from what you feel.”

He pauses and looks away, and I decide to seize upon the moment.

“Do I get to ask the same of you?”

My heart squeezes when his eyes find mine again. I see no doubts, no fears. There’s only sincerity, warmth, and regret.

“I am so sorry about last Friday night. I couldn’t understand what was going on in my head at the time, so there was no hope I’d be able to explain it to you. Knowing that, I shouldn’t have let things get so far while I wasn’t in the best frame of mind. Even more, I should have told you what was going on. I wasn’t trying to be an ass, but I was one. You deserve better from me.”

I start to speak as Mateo brings a finger to my lips to quiet me. He shakes his head and says, “So, the last one: from this point on, don’t shut me out again. Please. In fact, why don’t you choose a table, I’ll grab a couple of drinks, and you’ll let me explain.”

I give him a nod and smile. “Ok, Da Rocha. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Mateo

In a way, these nerves make no sense. We've always been comfortable together. We also both know that this is a make-or-break point in our relationship. So, I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see the nervous energy oozing from Alexa. It's something like a pot boiling over, and it wrecks me. I drink in the sight of this truly gorgeous woman, so vulnerable and uncertain. I did this to her, made her feel so completely unsure of us, and that will never do. I need to try to fix what I broke between us, so after ordering up a little assistance from the bar, I dive in.

"I can't tell you that I completely understand all of this. But I can tell you that I'm done ignoring the truth of what's between us. I thought I'd done that until Janeilia called. Hearing from her forced me to be honest with myself about what my feelings for you mean. It also reminded me of the pain and deceit that follows her. I had some trouble separating the two at first."

She remains stoic, but I know she has words for me, words I seem to need like I need air to breathe. I need to know what's going on within the chaos of her thoughts. The tension I feel is thick as the air on a humid summer's day, and it kills me by degrees the longer she stays silent. But I ride out the eternal moments as her eyes remain glued to the floor and then shift to the colorful tapestries on the wall. She looks anywhere but at me, and I can't take it anymore.

"Lexi, look at me. Tell me what you're thinking."

Alexa

When I collect the courage to look at him again, I know it's time to show him my heart, though I know he already reads more than a few signs that give me away. Like the little kid who thinks covering her eyes will hide her from the world, I throw up these typical diversions to no avail. But unlike that little kid, I know it's time to stand up and face my reality. I meet his stare, fear and frustration uniting to form a protective shield around me. I sigh, weary from the emotional toll of trying to manage these warring sides of myself, but they need to stand down. I want him. So. Very. Badly. So, I'll expose my longing, and if he stomps my heart, I'll

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have to deal. None of this awareness does much to slow the rapid beating of my heart as I prepare to jump from this emotional cliff. And I mean to take him with me.

The resolve in his expression arrests me. “Lex, take a minute and think about the time we’ve shared so far.” He leans in, his eyes focused and intense. “I *am* sorry that I hurt you. But over the years, I’ve grown accustomed to using sex as a shield. Call it my unnatural default. It’s a place I retreated to with you a few times in the past when things got tense between us and again last Friday when I needed some cover from what I was feeling. Even so, I know you know that you’re not some random girl to me. I know that you’re addicted to trail mix to the point of making your own. And when you’re excited about something, your eyes get this crinkle in the corners and seem to sparkle like you’re trying to spread your happiness with the world. I know that you’re kind and compassionate. I feel the passion you won’t allow yourself to indulge. I want us to build on that. I want you to keep letting me learn about you, the big things, the small things, anything really as long as we do it together.” He shrugs a little, his voice softer now. “I want everything with you, and I need to you to stop holding back.”

His expression is tender and sincere. Still, something continues to tickle my brain.

“Mateo, I know you think you mean that. But I don’t understand why you’re so certain that what happened after—” My brain stutters in search for the right words, finally settling on, “This isn’t just about how you acted on our date. You’d been withdrawing hard that entire week, and it had nothing to do with your ex having resurfaced. I spent my entire marriage never truly being sure of where I stood from minute to minute based on my ex’s moods. I won’t let myself go back there.”

His gaze softens as he stands up and walks around the table to take the seat beside mine. Once there, he drags the chair closer and turns to face me. But I lean away, letting him know I have more to say.

“There’s something more to this, though.”

I try to find my truth in his eyes when I see I've hit a nerve. My heart beats faster at his hesitation, but I press anyway.

"Look, I need you to deal with me in honesty. What happened that week? Before your ex reached out?"

He shakes his head and reaches for my hand, clinging tighter when I try to pull away. He frowns and brings his other hand on top of mine to pin me in place.

"It's nothing to worry about." His declaration is firm, his eyes pleading. "A woman from my past doesn't want to take no for an answer." He shifts his eyes away from me and though it's brief, instinct tells me he's hedging. "Between her crazy and hearing from Jancilia, it spooked me."

He reaches up and strokes my cheek with the back of his knuckles, accelerating my heartbeat again and making me long for so much more.

"I've got a handle on all that now. And I promise I'm done avoiding what I feel for you, Lexi. So, I'm asking you to forgive me. I need you to tell me that I didn't botch things up between us, and I need you to reassure me that we move forward together from this point."

When I don't immediately respond, he adds, "You asked what I want from you. What I want is to build a relationship together that uses the hurts from our past to help us grow stronger each day in spite of them – maybe even because of them."

Words don't come for me immediately as a million questions await their turn to see daylight. In silent agreement, Mateo and I reach for our glasses and down healthy portions, willing the liquid protection to coat our nerves and sooth our senses. It's been hours since lunch, so it doesn't take long for the caipirinha to coat my brain and dismiss my inhibitions.

"I want that, too."

I take a long, deep breath, working hard to contain the rush of emotions that flood my entire being.

"Good, then it's settled," he says, flashing a heartbreaking smile.

He reaches across the table to grasp my hands. "And let me never again make you fear what you feel, love," he says, his eyes

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bright with the hope I've kept buried in my chest. "We both have issues with relationships. And we're going to deal with them together. Ok?"

I'm skittish, but he at least deserves my openness until he gives me a reason why not. That's exactly what I give him.

Mateo

Emotionally exhausted now but incredibly relieved, I huff out a rough breath and ask a question I really don't want to.

"Anything else you'd like to know while we're playing true confessions?"

"Yes, actually," she says, and I struggle to keep from gritting my teeth at this news. "I think you may have talked to Sage recently. Anything I need to know?"

Of course, he'd tell her that, which pisses me off mildly, but I smile as I prepare to pour out more of myself.

"Seems he background checked me," I say, brows raised in disapproval. "Got to hand it to him. He's good."

"Wait. Why would he do that?"

I consider her as I construct my answer. I've shared more of myself with her this evening than I have with anyone outside of my mother. But fair is fair. Just as she has a right to know who and what I am from the inside out, maybe this is a chance for me to demystify some of her intrigue, too.

"Because he loves you, Lexi."

She smiles as if to dismiss me. "And I love him. But not like that. I've told you this."

"Perhaps not for you. But for him? I'm not so sure."

She frowns, obviously confused. "I don't follow. What are you getting at, Mateo?"

"His overprotectiveness for one. And why he decided to check me out."

"Again, I don't know what you're getting at."

I serve up a half smile, still not completely comfortable with the idea that having a relationship with Alexa will likely mean Vanucci's involvement in some way.

“So, I told you he looked into my background. Based on what you’re telling me, the catalyst was probably our flashpoint, though I expect he was probably just looking for a reason.”

I consider her carefully before I say one of the handful of things that remain unsaid between us. This is, after all, supposed to be our clean slate, so what better time to put this out there.

“I’m still not sure I like Vanucci. And he obviously doesn’t trust me, which is why he decided to investigate my ass. He called me with a shitload of questions, so we sat down over beers to hash it all out a couple of days ago.”

She hangs on my words as if dissecting each syllable, inflection, and nuance. Because she knows Vanucci better than I do, I’m sure she’s doing the math to demystify or maybe to justify his actions.

“Sage is an information hound, so when his nose tells him to follow a lead, that’s what he does. You know he’s been wary of us together from the start.”

“Yeah,” I admit as casually as I can while I try to smooth the jagged edges of my resentment for the guy. “He thinks I see you as a conquest, so he was set to cock block to keep you from getting hurt.”

“But, now, somehow, he’s satisfied that’s not the case?”

Clever question, love. “I couldn’t figure it out at the time, what you meant to him, I mean. I thought I was going to have to kick his ass. And then I listened to what he had to say. He has your best interests at heart, and he heard me out as well. After some time, we reached an understanding. I think I was able to set him straight.”

“Ok, but I’m curious. What did he find that made him get in touch?”

I’d love to be able to dance around this but know that I can’t. There are things in my past that I’d rather not share, not because they’re necessarily damning but because I’m not proud of them. Because they’re no longer who I am. But I can’t have her thinking I have anything to hide. In my favor is the fact that I did tell her about my father when I made up that stupid game at her house a couple of weeks ago. Hopefully, as I spill the details, we’ll still be ok.

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I've always hated history. It's given far too much credit for its predictive trends and has a nagging tendency to play on repeat. Its worst feature is its uncanny ability to damn a person without the benefit of a fair trial. If there's shit in your past, then you must be shit, too. I like to think I'm an exception to such assumptions.

I was born Mateo Santiago Lopez Nunez, son of Santiago Nicolás Garcia Lopez and Isabella Valentina Nunez Da Rocha. The men in my family nurtured close ties to and deep affections for *La Oficina de Envigado*, an offspring of the Medellín cartel. What began as a protection unit and debt collection agency for Pablo Escobar in the 1980s grew up to be the mafia conglomerate responsible for most of the drug trafficking and money laundering in Colombia today. It's also a name I'd hoped never to hear again. To it, my father had pledged allegiance and cashed in his soul, all in the name of power. He'd risen in the syndicate, and by the time I was in my teens, he'd become one of several chiefs in *La Oficina*.

As his fortunes rose in the gang, his cruelty bled into his home life. When I was still little, my mother managed to shield me from the death and brutality of my father's line of work. But once I turned 10, I began to display the scars of my father's lifestyle. Once happy and outgoing, I retreated from both the world and my family. My behavior teetered between disrespect and disregard as I worked to actively separate who I knew myself to be from who my father wished me to be. He insisted on taking me along in the course of his days, eagerly exposing me to his sadistic behaviors as well as his kills as he ascended to dominance within an increasingly splintered organization. During these times, he worked overtime to shape the way I thought about what it means to be a man, but we would never find common ground on the subject. When my mother couldn't handle it any longer, he granted her a divorce on the condition that she leave me with him in exchange for her freedom.

These are the memories that feed my nightmares. I'll never forget the smell of death on the wind and how my father enjoyed

nothing more than playing executioner to the poor and defeated. Somehow, though, none of the horrors I witnessed took form inside of me. I remained a conscientious objector of the lifestyle. But the fact that I don't define myself by my father's work doesn't mean others didn't. I'd been surprised that Vanucci had connected the dots of my heritage and had to work overtime to convince him that although I may have once been around it, I am not now nor have I ever been a part of it. So, no, I didn't want to lead with this, didn't want Alexa to have another reason to doubt me. We have enough obstacles between us.

As I lay out my essentials to her, I take heart in the fact that her body language doesn't reject me.

"How is it you keep yourself separate from your family, Mateo?"

A fair question. "Because I'm not a killer, torturer, grifter or drug lord, love. It's not in me. Never has been. And, my mother secured my freedom once she'd found her own."

"How's that?"

I smile as I remember. I owe my mother my life for being such a self-described boss bitch. My father wasn't very discriminating when it came to his love life. He kept women on the side. Everyone, including my mother, knew that. What they didn't know was that he had a special place in his heart for men. So, when she discovered this, my mother kept his secret, all while gathering evidence that would document his bisexuality. When I turned 18, she shared her evidence with him, and he was ready to explode. He tried to pay her to keep quiet because he knew that having his fellow crimies discover his sexual appetites weakened him and his position within the cartel. She refused his money alone, insisting on a compromise: In addition to payment, he would allow me to leave his hold and never try to pull me into his life again. In return, she'd keep his secret.

He agreed, and when I left Colombia for the States, I left everything about my childhood as far behind me as possible, taking my mother's maiden name as my own, both a symbolic and realistic way to cut ties with my family. The cloaking measures didn't deter Sage, though. Rather than accept the mystery

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suggested by the fact that he couldn't get a line on me, he kept digging until he got his hands on my parents' birth certificates. My mother's name, Isabella Valentina Nunez Da Rocha, and a basic understanding of Latin naming conventions gave Sage enough of a nibble, leading him to challenge me with his findings and warn me away from Alexa if necessary.

"Thank you for sharing all of that with me."

She eyes me warily, as though she doesn't want to say what's on her heart, so I wait her out as I finish the last of my drink and look around to signal the waiter for another. It looks as though I may need it.

"Does this mean that you and Sage are good now?"

"For now, at least."

Seemingly satisfied, she nods, and I release the anxiety tying my gut in knots until I see shadows cloud her eyes. There's something she's not telling me, and I can't let her hide.

"Then what else is bothering you, love?"

She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"It's nothing to do with us. We're fine."

"Perhaps but something has you a bit off."

She finishes her drink before sharing her own issues with an insistent ex and his attempts to get her alone over the past couple of days for reasons he won't explain. I'm not jealous by nature, but I feel rage boil inside of me, threatening to raze anything and anyone who dare upset her world. I let her defuse my curiosity about the situation for now, but we'll need to revisit the topic soon and very soon.

We go silent once dinner arrives, emotionally spent and equally enthralled by the delectable spread before us. It's far too much for two people and so like Mariana and her staff to go overboard.

"Mateo, this is delicious," she gushes, "but seriously, you seem to make going overboard a habit."

I brace for what's coming. Seems she's not all that different from her buddy Vanucci when it comes to scenting a story. She puts down her fork and studies me a moment.

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“I appreciate all the flowers and clearing an entire restaurant for the evening. But I don’t require grand gestures. I hope that’s not how I’ve come across to you.”

“Did you consider that maybe I wanted to do these things? That I have the resources available at my disposal? That maybe I like the idea of spoiling you a little. And, by the way, what’s your idea of a grand gesture?”

She looks embarrassed briefly before she blanks her expression, but I won’t have that.

“Alexa, stop. What’s this really about?”

She looks at me from beneath her lashes and sighs.

“I’m not one of those women who needs a man to spend tons of money on me. All I want and really ever need is your heart.”

I know what she’s getting at. I need her to see me. Not my things. Not my history. Just me. I need her to see that anything I give her reflects what’s in my heart. But I think we’ve had enough heavy shit for one evening, so I resolve to show her rather than tell her and simply answer, “Alexa, I want to give you everything. So, let me. Let’s enjoy the rest of our evening and worry about putting things into proper perspective some other time.”

Act Three: The Naked Truth

Chapter 18

A Moment with Truth

I was always the smart girl in class, the kid that everyone secretly admires but openly shuns. I never let it get me down that much and really kinda liked it if I'm honest. It means I stood out. As I should have. I was always true to myself when the others were busy trying to be coolest or fastest or strongest or prettiest. Me? All I knew was how to be me. It's all I know to this day because once upon a time, authenticity mattered. It was a valued virtue, which used to be enough to make everyone else at least want to try to find their own truths and toe the line so they, too, could share in a little of my shine. Then she showed up.

Can I just tell you how unprepared I was for how bad my life would get when the new girl joined?! Once Influence hit the scene, I was systematically, categorically mocked, teased, and muted. At times, I thought maybe I'd become invisible. I questioned myself for the first time ever and wondered if my worldview needed to

be adjusted, shifted, or reshaped. But that's Influence for you. Knocking you off your game by seducing you with self-pity, reducing you to self-doubt, and, ultimately, leaving you with a whole lot of self-recrimination. Then, once she's drawn your attention, her alchemy transforms the systems that manage your views, values, and convictions. Few see through her thinly veiled, carefully constructed façade for the ruse it is. But trust me: she's one slick and disingenuous bitch hellbent on defiling integrity and obscuring individuality.

As you might imagine, the dawn of the age of Influence began a rather tense few years for me. I continued to cast light on the dark, uncertain cavities that define ignorance as Influence cloaked reality with bravado, theatrics, and sleights of hand. She's a pretender, yet she's showered with attention while I'm forced into the margins in a twisted quest to destroy, replace, and redefine who I am and what I'm about. Simply by making *looking* good appear more attractive than *being* good, everyone stopped striving for more. They all scattered, content to pursue any and all ambitions whether they were just, right, or moral.

That's about when it hit me; I'm the unscalable mountain that many may tackle but few will conquer. She's a toy for the incurious to chase, a false idol with the appeal of fool's gold, but that's no argument against worshipping her, it seems. I guess embracing Truth is far less appealing if you aren't built for the long game, which, too, is an apparent relic from an ancient state of mind and a slower pace of play. All we have in the present tense, quite literally, is today. And so that brings us back to *do*: why work hard or long when there are shortcuts that might take us to a more promising land in half the time for a fraction of the work? Why, indeed, when, if you know the right people and have Influence on your side, you can become president of a world power? Shocking.

All of this does suck. What mortifies me most is the moral decay it signifies. Influence, like the mythical genie in a bottle, seduces with the transitory promise of celebrity, respect, success, and admiration. Fifteen minutes is better than no airtime at all. But tell me: What happens after the close-up, especially if it shines light

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on things best kept locked away within the annals of what one never should see, do, or imagine?

A certified member of Team Influence, Wilson Hedgepeth has refused Alexa's calls for the past 18 hours. That's a bad sign because the man requires a harness and muzzle when he walks among polite society. She may be in the business of spinning away the pain, but Alexa holds only so much power within Hedge's sphere of influence. At the crossroads where conviction and corporation meet, she'll soon face a significant decision point with the power to remake her life and relationships. At the same time, and because Life loves to script us in once-in-a-lifetime roles with precious few weeks until the first curtain call, Mateo discovers the indelible nature of history and its directly proportionate relationship to my little sister, Honesty. He knows her well. We both hope he'll do the right thing. But Accountability thinks we're up a tree. She laughed at us when we updated her last night. I sometimes hate how negative she can be. And I truly hope she's wrong.

Friday, October 4

Alexa

I need to know where my client's head is after yesterday's meeting. Inherently dodgy, Hedge is likely poised to launch what in his mind is a defensive missive, creating yet another unwanted and unnecessary crisis to distract from the reality of what's happening in his increasingly hectic world.

One thing is certain: Given the choice, Hedge will eschew truth for the ability to influence what others believe through spin, deflection, or outright deception. Like so many other men and women of means, he places a premium on his self-interests above all else. He relies on bluster, feeding the hungry airways of social media and betting on the often-indiscriminate way that its users consume and propagate content to create reasonable doubt. Even getting a handful of folks to raise doubts would serve his selfish purposes and make my job not only more difficult, but also unattractive and, increasingly, unmanageable. I'm relieved to see that he's refrained from broadcasting himself for the time being.

But he's not one to lie low for long. He'll write and direct an alternate ending that confuses and confounds. Yet, there's always an audience for his absurdities, waiting to lap up any crumb whether it's shit or sugar. Before I came along, Sydell played into this twisted system of his quite nicely, giving him far more, I'm certain, for his retainer than he could ever have imagined because her stunts crafted a persona for the man that deflected from his misdeeds.

Now that I'm in this seat, I have to consider Storey|Fischer's next move and if, indeed, we should make one at all. I dragged myself to the office this Friday morning dreading and resenting the reality that our client has created. Though I'm satisfied with his stated position relative to his energy exploration pursuits, questions of his character and morality are certain to overtake any positive results we may otherwise achieve.

I can't know what the media may or may not cover, but I do sense that Hedge faces an inevitable fall. Our firm must decide what role, if any, we'll play in helping construct a wall of protection around him as he picks up what pieces of his life may remain once they're bleached raw by the light of day.

I wonder at my hyper focus on Hedge when all I really want to do is go to Mateo. We'll see each other this evening once I'm done with things here. In the meantime, job one this morning will be to meet with our executive committee and find clarity on the path forward with Hedge.

Forty minutes later, I've briefed the firm's other leaders on the outcomes of yesterday's meeting at the *Washington Post*. As I gauge the room for reaction, I'm glad that I'd shared news of the chatter around Hedge's alleged sexual misconduct before today. It makes the present situation less of an October surprise as we plan our crisis response. But our shared knowledge is where the alignment in the room begins and ends. As expected, this team divides itself along an unfortunate but necessary fault line: S|F|S's profit motive. I keep the long view in my sights as ideas are volleyed about and opinions are shared and struck down. In the end, I am King Solomon, and I must issue the decree that will split this baby. It's the only logical course of action. But unlike Solomon, I don't

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exactly like the over-under when it comes to predicting my success.

“Instead of trying to contain or manage it, has anyone thought of a way to do a little catch-and-kill of our own?”

I’m disappointed but not at all surprised by Jackson Liddle’s question. As CFO, he has a bottom line to protect. And, as Sydell’s closest ally next to Lachlan Storey, I’m sure he’s chomping at the bit to help her get back a bit of her pride at the loss of her leadership role. Standing in my way or at least taking any view counter to mine would be a solid step in that direction.

“You’re suggesting we walk on dangerous ground, Liddle,” our general counsel, Wesley Caulfield, counters. “You’re talking about the *Washington Post*. Not the *New York Post*.”

I’m grateful for his remark and chuckle to myself because rare is the time I find myself in alignment with anything a lawyer has to say. But in treacherous times, we often find allies in unexpected corners.

“Wes, I’d like to hear your take on how we keep our noses clean – especially when we consider a worst case in which Hedge is called to face legal charges,” I interject, heading Jackson off before he can respond.

His response is as I’d expect: find a position that maintains the firm’s neutrality and gives us enough space to exit from the conversation if things go legal. It would be a bad look to fire Hedge as a client. It would look equally bad to promote or advocate for a position one way or another. And so, to the dismay of many and the contentment of a precious few, we have our marching orders: do nothing for now but be prepared for when the madness descends.

I leave the meeting less than satisfied but not nearly as forlorn as I thought I might be. I’ll spend the next 72 hours on unofficial call, ready to begin placing the information force field around his misdeeds. But I refuse to let that reality get in the way of allowing myself to enjoy my weekend with Mateo.

It’s nearly noon now, and I’ve made the executive decision to pack up and head home. Mateo and I made plans last evening to begin our weekend today as soon as I’m clear of work

responsibilities. He's heading over to meet my kids tonight, which explains why I've been in high obsess mode all day. I expect this will continue throughout the day, but I need to bring work to a close if I'm truly to have a peaceful getaway. I look around my office and take a quick survey of what I may need in case I have to be on call over the weekend. I've packed my laptop as well as a variety of files containing news articles on HedgeCo. I walk over to the small conference table in the corner of my office and take a seat to gather my thoughts a final time before leaving. Even in this age of smart phones, email, and task lists, I still prefer to jot down my to-dos on sticky notes. I reach for the ever-ready stack at the center of my conference table, grab a pen, and take down a few reminders to guide my thinking around the things I may need to say if the proverbial shit hits the fan.

"Lexi, dear, a minute please."

Sam's voice stays my hand. I shouldn't necessarily assume that his visit brings bad news. However, his absence from this morning's meeting didn't go unnoticed.

"Of course, Sam," I reply. "I'm about to head out for the day, but what can I do for you?" I figure if I dive in, we can get this over with.

He walks over to join me where I sit, a warm smile on his lips. Apparently, he spoke with Gray Lowell, an opinion page editor who was on tap to see Hedge tap out yesterday. Based on Gray's insights, the *Post* is likely to run with at least one story over the weekend, probably on Sunday, but it's not clear whether Hedge or his company will be the chief focus.

"Considering the fact that Hedge is apparently MIA, I'm mulling over the best way to field the queries. Got any ideas?" I ask, the reality of those words leaving a bitter aftertaste.

"What do you mean MIA?"

"I mean he's not returning my calls and has his office stonewalling me for information. I was told that he returned to Austin, but that doesn't seem to be true." As I speak the words, the way forward begins to crystalize for me. "So, though I'd like to keep this between us for now, I'm leaning towards ending our representation if criminal charges are filed. If he miraculously

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avoids being charged, we should revisit the scope of what this firm hopes to achieve or can even accomplish on his behalf.”

Sam regards me closely as I speak, and I can see a gleam of pride in his eyes. It’s a look he hasn’t earned the right to display, and I’m finding it hard not to show my irritation. I try to tamp down whatever he sees in my body language or facial expression because this is neither the time nor place to walk that emotional plank. But I’m apparently too late. Whatever he observes betrays my discomfort as his look shifts to something more neutral. His lips press into a tight line, and his eyes shutter.

“We’re indeed at a decision point. We’d likely meet with resistance from the others if we have to make a game-no game decision.

“For what it’s worth,” he presses on, “you made a huge impression at the paper yesterday. I hear you played a shit hand masterfully.”

I cock my head sideways because I’m not certain what that has to do with anything. “Your point?”

“The point is that you may have saved Hedge from total public slaughter by being the voice of reason, by understanding that the paper has a job to do just as you do. Put another way: you didn’t try to lie and spin your client out of the situation. That’s rare these days, my dear. Doesn’t mean Hedge isn’t likely to get some press he doesn’t like. It does mean that you may have polished off many of the rougher edges that Hedge didn’t seem to mind revealing yesterday.”

“And the fact that Sage and I are friends has nothing to do with likely outcomes at all.”

I plant sarcasm deep inside of these words because how could having a relationship with the managing editor not place at least some advantage in our corner?

“I didn’t say all that,” Sam says, amusement lacing his words. “But from all reports, neither of you flaunted that relationship. There’s plenty of respect due from both sides. So, I congratulate and thank you for handling yourself and a terrible situation with grace and professionalism. Then again, it’s why I wanted you here in the first place, Lexi. Thank you for helping to restore at least a

bit of this firm's reputation. It means more to me than I can express. But I'll find a way."

In typical Sam fashion, he stands to leave having hit the high note in today's edition of this tragic soap opera. "Ah yes, one more thing, Lexi." He turns as he approaches my door, his face displaying mild concern.

"I've received two calls from Trent today. Says it's urgent that we speak. Something about your continued refusal to meet with him?"

I frown, still uncertain and supremely on edge where Trent's concerned. "Sam, I have nothing to say to Trent. But he's never known how to accept no. How that concerns you, I have no idea."

He considers me for a moment before speaking. "I'm not certain either. But what I do know is that he's determined not to be put off."

He gives a quick nod and says he'll keep me informed. We exchange pleasantries for the weekend ahead, and he turns to leave.

I fill the next few moments making loose plans for the crisis model that will address our worst-case scenario. And, because I can do no more than that at the moment, I decide to leave these worries here as I find a genuine smile for the first time today, grab my things, and leave this place behind me. For the time being anyway.

Chapter 19

Mateo

Driving has always calmed me. Behind the wheel, I can unleash the frustration and anger I hold while still clinging to the threads of self-control. My mind flips through a stack of possibilities as I head down the highway and towards Alexa's house in my blood red Jaguar F-type convertible. I don't throw my money around, but I do allow myself an indulgence or two. Cars top that list, and I'm grateful for this today as I let the Jag's throaty engine comfort me. I've never shied away from pushing a well-tuned machine to its limits – within limits that won't gain unwanted police attention – whenever I've reached mine. I'm never reckless with it. But I might come close to irresponsible today as I weave through the steady stream of asshole motorists and unskilled jerks. My agitation is turbocharged by concerns about Janeilia.

Well tired of her persistent texts and determined to keep the slate clean with Lexi, I reached out this morning to see what in hell was her problem. Whether her goal is to entrap or extort, I can't know, but there's clearly some deeper scheme at the heart of whatever it is she's trying to launch. I consider our brief talk and her wild-ass claims. I'll need to get to the bottom of it all, but for tonight, my mind is filled with the growing apprehension I feel over meeting Alexa's family. I smile at the twinge of awkwardness that's beginning to reveal itself. I'm not deterred. But I am off center.

Whether I'll fill Alexa in on the day's events isn't in question. It's how and when given that we may not have the alone time I

need to drop this news on her. I'll just have to bide my time and go with the flow until I can sit with her and talk this through. I put away thoughts of Janeila and anything unrelated to the Winston clan as I ease to a stop near the middle of Alexa's semi-circular driveway. I grab the dessert and two bottles of wine I've brought along and head up the steps. I don't get to the top before the front door swings open, and she greets me with an easy smile.

"Hey," she says, and I bend down to kiss her gently on the cheek. If her word vomit is any indication, she's a bit uneasy, too. "I'm not sure what I can say or do to prepare you for the chaos that you'll see once you get inside. So, I'll understand if you want to cut and run—"

"Stop worrying," I interrupt her, patting her arm to soothe her concern. "I think it'll be fun to see what you're like when no one's watching."

"Let's see if you think that 10 minutes from now."

I follow her into the kitchen where she's finishing dinner preparations. The smells of something Italian waft through the air as she tosses crisp, colorful vegetables in a huge salad bowl. I place the bottles and pastry on her kitchen counter.

"What's this?"

"I wasn't sure what you were making, so to be safe, I brought one bottle of red and one bottle of white. And the dessert," I explain, gesturing towards the pastry box, "is from Mariana, who says to tell you hello by the way."

She smiles, "What a great surprise! And tell her hello when you talk again."

She walks over to grab the white wine and, finding it already chilled, rummages in her cabinets until she finds a marble chiller. As she places the bottle inside, Alexa's sons come barreling into the room in tight formation.

"Is that him?" the smallest one asks, looking with great expectation to the one I'm assuming to be the middle brother based on his height and appearance relative to the others.

He gives his little brother a scowl. "No genius, it's Paul Bunyan," he sasses, earning him a punch in the arm from the

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other, obviously older Winston son. This one approaches me, shaking his head.

“Please let me say that I’m sorry for that and anything else these goons get into tonight.” He seems to be looking for what to say next, so I absolve him from having to. “No worries. I’m Mateo Da Rocha. Pleased to meet you.”

I extend my hand, which he readily accepts, his grip firm and sure.

“I’m Tristan,” he says, “and these two goofs are Trace and Treat,” he offers, pointing to the younger boys. After giving Tristan the stink eye, each comes over to shake my hand as we exchange our pleasantries.

“Why don’t you boys go get washed up?” Alexa interjects as she walks over to my side. “I’ll have dinner on the table in about ten minutes.”

They nod and hurry off down a hallway, their voices a muffled mix of indistinguishable sounds and laughter as they go about their business. I turn to Alexa.

“They’re pretty lively.”

“You have no idea,” she says. “And I’m sorry in advance for any shenanigans they try to get off.”

“What?” I ask, my smile wide, “they’re obviously close and not shy in the least. I think that’s pretty great.”

Her answering smile is rueful. “You’re being kind, but yeah. They’re close. And remember, I warned you that they’re probably up to something.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry,” I say, stopping her and grabbing her by the shoulders to turn her towards me. “And how about we swap stories of the day as soon as we have some time to ourselves?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Why did you send all those flowers to mom?”

Trace asks through a mouthful of garlic and rosemary chicken.

“Trace, you’re not a barn animal. Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Alexa admonishes.

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He sips water from his glass and gives his mother a sheepish grin. "Sorry, but it's a valid question."

I chuckle as I put down my fork and give him his answer. "Well, Trace, sometimes guys do stupid things. I did something really stupid, and your mom stopped talking to me."

"What did you do?" Tristan asks, his pointed tone and energy much less matter-of-fact. I consider him closely and choose my words with meticulous care.

"We've been seeing each other casually for a few months," I shift my eyes to Alexa to check for any reaction to my opening pitch. This is the way I've decided to talk about the time we spent together before now. "When I finally realized how I feel about your mom, I didn't want to admit it at first, to myself or to her, so I lied about my feelings. I made her feel like she wasn't special when I actually think she's really great. I've never met anyone like her."

"Why?" Treat asks, adding quickly, "Why did you lie about how you feel? Mom says you shouldn't lie. She doesn't like liars."

I smile and nod at the beautiful little boy. He's the one who looks most like Alexa, and I think her spirit and influence resonate in him most profoundly as well.

"Your mom's right. I decided to lie about my feelings for her, about whether or not I wanted to have a relationship with her, because I didn't want to have to deal with the heavy stuff."

"So, she cut you off because you couldn't make up your mind?" Trace probes, his eyes penetrating like the world hangs in the balance depending on my answer.

"Yes, Trace, she did."

He nods and then looks to his mother. "So, was this those few days when you were moping around like someone killed your new puppy?"

Alexa wipes her mouth with her napkin and smirks at her son. "I guess that's fair, kiddo."

"And so," Tristan chimes in, "Mateo, a.k.a., Mr. Grand Gesture, fixed his fuck up by sending a million flowers, got the girl, and they lived happily ever after."

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“Mateo is our guest, and you will watch your language!” Alexa admonishes with a look of horror. “True, I allow you to express yourself fully, but—”

“Mom, I’m sorry. It’s casual.” Tristan replies with a shrug and a smirk. He shifts his gaze to me. “Pardon me, but I tend to call it as I see it. And, since you’re seeing our mom now, I didn’t think that really put you in the guest column.”

“You’re fine,” I respond and look to Alexa hoping to ease her alarm. “It’s all good, love.”

She gives me a small smile but quickly schools her expression and sweeps her gaze past each of the boys. I’ll need to add Jedi mind control to her list of superpowers. Her telepathic sway over these kids is on full display as they each stand down from whatever they see in her look. It’s a thing of beauty to behold.

The rest of our meal is far less eventful as we chat idly, and the boys take turns recounting the day’s events. Alexa and I sip our wine as we let them guide the aimless discussion. This is a perfect slice of normal, capping off what has to this point been one of the most turbulent days I’ve endured in a long time. Once again, it’s exactly what I didn’t know I needed, giving me one more reason to cherish this incredible woman and the many gifts she’s brought to my life.

Chapter 20

A Moment with Truth

The Winston boys are basically good, well-adjusted, and well-mannered. I do love them dearly. But like all boys, they have their moments, many of which Alexa never discovers until it's too late to do anything to change them. They never, ever mean any harm. But curiosity, mischief, and ingenuity are tough playmates for this trio to elude. Let me introduce you more properly.

Whether searching for a confiscated smart phone or foraging for frequently consumed foods safely “hidden” to protect them from themselves, the brothers always worked as a team to meet mission. Tristan usually assigned himself the most covert role he could find. Stealthy by nature, he did his best work when behind the scenes directing, deciphering, and plotting next steps. Whether Trace or Treat was assigned to the front lines varied depending on the desired outcome. If the goal was to wrest money from Alexa, Treat was at the ready, poised to do and say all things cute and edgy in order to win Mom over and make the ask (which almost always had a positive outcome.) Even though he was the youngest, he was by far the wiliest, most mischievous of the three and carried

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out his assigned missions with pure glee. He neither considered nor feared repercussions or negative outcomes. His philosophy: if there's fun to be had in the commission of such acts, then bring it on. What may come may come.

Trace was charming and witty, making him a highly versatile operative depending on the quest. As the one who could make Alexa laugh most hysterically, he often provided the distraction when the brothers were carrying out such secret missions as covering up for the fact that one was playing video games for too long, hadn't cleaned his room, or had committed some other punishable infraction. Trace also saw front-line action where matters of the heart were concerned. This was because he and his mom seemed to share the most public emotional bond. Not that he was the favored nation. But cuddle bug was resident in his DNA. From the day Alexa brought him home from the hospital, Trace found his deepest sense of comfort in his mother's arms or nuzzling her hair or, more recently, sharing thoughts, hopes, and dreams.

Tonight's quest posed a very different challenge, though, so *Operation: Who Dat?* Would be Tristan's alone to execute. At the heart of this matter: truth. He didn't trust his brothers with finding out all about Mateo – at least not the stuff he wanted to know. What he didn't count on was the fact that Mateo, a keen student of human behaviors and, therefore, an accomplished boots-on-the-ground strategist himself, would march boldly onto the battlefield to meet him toe to toe.

Uncharacteristically, Tristan fired the opening salvo. As Alexa clinks away at the dirty dishes from their dinner, Mateo sits in the basement watching a classic episode of *Spongebob Squarepants* with the younger Winston brothers. As Treat and Trace debate the pros and cons of whether Spongebob should listen to Mr. Krabbs and set his pet seahorse, Mystery, free, Tristan drags an ottoman into the parlor and plops it down across from Mateo.

“So, Mom says you're a professor. What do you teach, and is that how you and she met?” Tristan aims his cold gaze towards this unknown subject.

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“Well, I teach classes about a variety of topics related to psychology and how we can use it to understand more about how and why people communicate the way they do,” Mateo says, admiring the boy’s bold, no-frills approach. “And yes, that’s exactly how we met. Your mom and I met when we did a panel discussion together.”

“I see. And how long have you two been fucking?”

Tristan feels a surge of anger as the words leave his lips. He isn’t quite sure why he’s feeling this way either. He hated his father deeply. He loves his mother madly. He didn’t ever want to see her hurt again. And he didn’t know squat about the guy sitting across from him. Nothing he was feeling made sense now, which made him even angrier.

Mateo clears his throat as he tries to bite back his laughter at the 15-year-old’s audacity. Quickly, he sizes up Tristan’s energy before choosing his reply. Though not quite certain how he should answer, and even less certain that their conversation will be productive, he does know that it would be better to talk away from the younger boys, who sit staring in disbelief at their big brother’s audacious inquisition.

“We’ve been friends for several months, Tristan, but things just became serious recently. Since you asked, we should probably talk about that. Got a few minutes?”

Completely unarmed by that answer, Tristan locks eyes with Mateo. He didn’t know what to expect, but the anger that just moments ago gripped his gut is replaced with curiosity and a sense of being off balance.

“Um, yeah. I mean, I guess so.”

Tristan rises from his seat, wipes his sweaty palms down the front of his jeans, and motions with his head for Mateo to follow him. Without much notice at all from Trace and Treat, whose attention was now safely returned to the care of *Spongebob*, the pair pass through the double-glass doors leading to the quaint and lovely garden just outside the room. It was a perfect fall evening. The air, filled with the sweet scent of decaying leaves, and the relatively clear sky allowed a galaxy of stars to shine and twinkle

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brightly like fireflies in mid-June. Tristan jams his hands into his pockets as deeply as he can and stands awkwardly beside Mateo.

“First off, relax,” Mateo says, turning to face Tristan. He places a hand on the boy’s shoulders, gently, briefly then backs to sit on the semi-circular brick wall surrounding the back patio. He knew he needed to be as nonthreatening as possible and towering over the boy probably wasn’t the best way to accomplish that.

“I care deeply about your mom.” Mateo swallows and searches Tristan’s eyes for reaction. “I would never intentionally hurt her.” He waits a moment, digesting the rawness and truth in his own words before adding. “You guys are her entire world, and so I’d really like the chance to get to know you and your brothers.”

Tristan was truly thrown off by Mateo’s words, but he doesn’t have a chance to process much of it before Mateo says more.

“Now don’t get me wrong. I would never try to take your dad’s place. That wouldn’t be fair or proper.”

“Now I *know* you can’t know Mom all *that* well,” Tristan replies sarcastically. “Exactly what *place* are you talking about? I haven’t seen or spoken to my father since he left us, so there’s really no place for you to take, now is there?”

Mateo studies the fire in the young man’s eyes, where he finds a profound point of connection.

“You know,” Mateo says, his words flowing more slowly, carefully now, “your mom doesn’t like to talk about the past very much, but I do know that the split from your dad wasn’t easy and that he hasn’t been a part of your lives since.” He stands up and walks a few steps to his left to lean against the brick planter behind him. “No, I don’t know all the details about you and your father. But I know what it’s like when your father doesn’t give a shit about you.”

Tristan, who had been staring at the ground for the past few moments, looks up at Mateo wanting to know more.

“So, your dad split on you, too?”

“No. It might have been better if he had. I grew up right under his nose, right in the same house. But it was like I never existed. Even when he and my mom split, he forced her to give him physical custody of me so he could raise me the way he wanted.

Never been able to figure that one out because he treated me like something dirty on the bottom of his shoes most of the time. Other times, it was like I was invisible because I wasn't who he wanted me to be. All I ever wanted to know was that he gave a damn if I lived or died, you know what I mean?"

Tristan considers this before responding. "I guess, dude. Yeah. Even when my dad was here, he was never really *here* with us." His response telegraphs almost no emotion. But it does open the possibility of connection between them.

"Well, then, since we seem to have a little something in common, maybe we can hang out, get to know each other better. That is, unless you're too busy. Or not interested in being friends."

"Yeah, we could hang out, I guess," replies Tristan, feeling strangely psyched inside. "Since you're going to be here to see Mom and stuff, so yeah."

"Great. I'd like that," Mateo says. He smiles warmly at Tristan and extends his fist for a pound. As Tristan returns the gesture, Alexa walks out to the patio.

Alexa

I'm stuck in place as I watch this scene in front of me. When I decided to have the kids meet Mateo, Tristan had been my biggest concern. He's been my sentry since birth and took the position he'd claimed for himself even more seriously after Trent left. I half expected him to yap and nip at Mateo's heels when he arrived a couple of hours ago. Instead, it seems Tristan's the one who's been brought to heel.

"Gentlemen," I say, trying but failing to check my curiosity, "I wondered where you two went." Tristan blesses me with an easy smile, thanks Mateo for the talk and is polite enough as he says his goodbyes, excusing himself hastily to take off into the house.

"You know I have to ask. What on Earth was that about?"

"We were just getting to know each other a little better," Mateo offers from his perch on the wall. He flashes me a gorgeous but cryptic smile and motions me closer. As I walk the few feet towards where he sits, I'm not certain what I want to ask next. And luckily, I don't have to decide.

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“We found some common ground on the topic of shitty fathers.”

I grimace. I would probably always consider it a personal failing that my boys were growing up without their father. It was the one part of my divorce that I thought I might never heal from. It was clear to me each day, every time I looked at their faces. Bitterness and longing shaded their hopes, muting the light that should have shone from within, that should have been so epically bright that it blinded everyone around them. And that’s when it hit me. I think saw a glimmer of that light in Tristan’s face just now.

Watching me closely, Mateo shifts on the wall a bit and reaches for me, placing me between his tautly muscled legs. “So, I guess you could say,” he continues as he draws me even closer to him, “that I saw something in Tristan tonight. At first, he wanted to let me know what a badass he is. But instead, I hope he realized that we’re not all that different and that we have more than a few important things in common.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, crazy girl. The father issues. And you.”

I smile and probably blush as I consider this. It’s tentative but hopeful, and before I can reply, he pulls me still closer against him, his hands fully encircling my waist, his eyes locked with mine.

“Enough of that, though,” he says, his face turning somber now, “I need to tell you about my afternoon.”

He’s gauging my reaction, and I begin to panic a little when I hear the hesitation in his voice. I nod but say nothing as I feel the mix of trepidation, frustration, and resentment pouring from him.

He sighs and shakes his head. “Janeilia’s been calling non-stop for a few days now as you know. She’s been insisting that we meet in person because she feels she needs to explain why she and my brother are getting divorced.”

“What’s that got to do with you? I don’t follow,” I interrupt, my nerves in full control of my brain and tongue, too.

“I’m getting to that, love,” he answers, reaching up to stroke my cheek. “Keep listening.”

I nod and try to manage my nervous energy.

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“She says that she has a son and that he has an illness. She’s upset because he needs a bone marrow transplant and neither she nor Nico is a match for the boy.”

An alarm blares in my head as I take the logical leap. “She’s thinking you might be.”

“Yes,” he answers quietly. “She also says I may be the father.”

“And do you believe her?”

“No, not at all,” he answers. It’s quick and definitive, and I believe him. I’m not sure if it’s because I want to or because I believe he’s telling the truth. I only know that my certainty guarantees my faith in his honesty. That’s enough for me, but I do have questions.

“How can you be sure? I mean, if the timing makes sense, then I don’t see how you can be so certain that you guys didn’t get pregnant.”

It’s an effort not to choke on those words and what they could mean for our future. But I can’t let my mind linger on that just yet.

“First off, the more I think about it, I’m not sure that the math does work. And on the real, I’ve been religious about not fathering children, even more so during that time frame because I hadn’t finished school. Had too much to lose. So, in addition to using condoms, I always found a way to use spermicides as part of foreplay, just to be extra safe. I know that doesn’t make it foolproof, but I would bet money that I didn’t father that boy.”

“And I take it you told her as much. How did that go over?”

“Not well, and it won’t be the last time I’ll have to deal with her on this. But I need you to know that none of this will affect you and me. I won’t let it.” He looks at me with so much affection it almost hurts.

“What’s next then?”

“I’ll take a paternity test to have myself eliminated.”

“Ok. But just because you’re not his father doesn’t mean that you may not be a match for his blood marrow.”

He nods. “Yes, I’ve considered that, but one step at a time.” He cocks his head to the side. “Tell me that’s not panic I see on your face.”

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“It’s not joy,” I answer, trying mightily to stuff down the worst of possibilities parading across my brain.

“Oh, no, baby,” he admonishes me, kissing my forehead and nuzzling my neck. He pulls back to look at me, letting me see the fullness of his feelings. “This changes nothing between us. Do I think she’s up to something? Yes. And I think it has to do with more than her son’s paternity. But she can’t come between us.”

“And you’re that certain that she won’t try to?”

He laughs. “Of course, she will.”

After grudgingly saying goodbye to Mateo, I take a few moments in my den to reflect on the evening. I’ll admit I was captivated and relieved by his easy way with my boys. It was enchanting and authentic. I’ll sleep easy tonight knowing we at minimum cleared this first, most important hurdle on this path we’re racing in tandem. He made a great impression.

As he was leaving, the boys made him promise that he’d come back tomorrow and just “vibe.” He’d agreed, though neither of us is quite sure what vibing entails. Of course, we’ve resolved officially to abandon our duathlon training, though at this point, that really didn’t need to be said as we’ve been missing in action for weeks now.

When I awake the next morning, I see that I’ve missed a few calls and a message from Lindy. She’ll need to wait, though, as I hop into the shower and prepare to start my day. When I’m fresh from my long, steamy retreat a half hour later, I see my friend hasn’t given up.

Lindy: Why didn’t you answer my earlier text? Rumor has it your man met the tribunal last night. Does this mean he’ll be running the besties’ gauntlet soon?

I shouldn’t be amazed at the fact that it hasn’t been 24 hours since the boys met Mateo, but I sigh anyway, low-key resenting the fact that I can’t keep my business to myself. I can think of a few responses, all appropriate given the circumstances, but I settle on something bland instead.

Me: One hurdle at a time, majesty.

While I sit staring at the dancing bubbles on my phone screen, my phone rings again, announcing another call from Sam, who's apparently been calling intermittently all morning. I send the call to voice mail because I dread anything he might want to tell me that could soil my weekend. My focus will be on making sure Mateo and my boys get off to a proper beginning.

Lindy: Don't be a brat. You will commit to letting us meet him...soon. Ciao!

I send her a smiley face emoji in reply and try hard not to resent her ever-meddling ass.



Several additional calls from Sam pile up throughout the day, the mounting voice messages an artifact of our phone-free afternoon. Mateo, the boys, and I have spent the last couple of hours hanging outside, listening to music and, well, vibing.

“Mom, someone’s at the door,” Tristan announces as he rejoins us from his trip to the kitchen to replenish our snacks, though he couldn’t be bothered to check the Nest video to see who it is. I thank him and head inside, more than a little curious because people don’t just drop in on me. As I swing open the door, I’m dismayed to find Sam propped against the door frame, his face displaying a rather insistent, impatient expression.

“Have you been getting my phone calls?” he asks, breezing past to enter the house without invitation.

I purse my lips and close the door while working to find the strength to deal with this man in patience.

Mateo

When Alexa doesn’t come back immediately, I decide to hunt her down. I follow the sound of voices until I discover Alexa’s rising from the dining room, frustration clear in the tone and increasingly clipped lilt of her words.

“Sam, don’t try to sweet talk and cajole me into going against my instincts,” she says. Her words set my feet into motion, and I’m stopped in my tracks when I round the corner and find her

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hunched over at her table with her fingers pinching the bridge of her nose.

“This isn’t about sweet talking you, Lexi,” he says, moving closer to enjoy the full advantage of towering over her. “This is business. Simple as that. We do as Hedgepeth demands or lose his business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, and what happened to change your mind since yesterday? You’re not only asking me to be the face of this bullshit, to be his spokesperson, but you’re also asking me to stand squarely in the middle of the SelmaTec storm. Based on what I know about this piece in the *Post*, what I know about Hedge, that’s not going to work for me. I can make a general statement, but we shouldn’t get too close to this.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you lost this lofty idea that everything will work as it should in the name of all that’s right!? You’ve always been a dreamer, dear Lexi. But right now, I need you to step up and be a leader instead of trying to run my firm like some love-in.”

His words are agitated, which agitates her and sets me on edge.

“That was a calculated, manipulative low blow, Sam. You expect me to pour out more and more of myself in honor of some twisted sense of duty you believe I should uphold. When will I ever get it? You only want someone to do your heavy lifting. Be your henchman. Yet, the one thing I ask of you, you refuse to give.”

“Apples and oranges, Lexi dear,” he answers, holding up a hand to halt her words. “This isn’t the time for useless history lessons. The way I see it, the only thing you should be focused on right now is how to hold on to this account. Maybe we can get Caverton to agree to having your input from an oversight capacity. Either way, it means putting yourself in the eye of the storm and deflecting it any way you can.”

Her reaction shows me that her patience has snapped.

“No!” she says, pain and anguish clear on her face. “I don’t care how you see it. You ask me to do this. You say you trust my judgment. I tell you that you’re asking me to compromise my integrity, but you press your advantage anyway to get to what you

want.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “So, let me ask you one more time: What happened between yesterday afternoon and today to change your mind and make you question my judgment?”

His face reddens and his eyes fill with a mix of fury, frustration, and if I’m not mistaken, fear. “I have some additional information now thanks to Trent, and—”

“You let Trent change your mind? What the—”

“Will you listen for once?!” he demands, slamming his hand on the table. “Trent’s threatened to make things difficult unless we make some concessions where he and his firm are concerned.” He looks away from Alexa and continues. “We don’t have to like it. But in this case, he has a point.”

She laughs and mutters something that I can’t quite make out. “Since when did you care what Trent thought? And since when did you give in to idle threats?”

“There’s nothing idle about this firm’s reputation! My reputation! Hell, it’s all on the line. That’s since when!”

She drops her head, and I watch her shoulders sag as she pinches the bridge of her nose. “What I want, need, or even think has never meant shit to you, so here’s how this is going to go. The story will drop. My phone will ring. I’ll make a general statement that in no way calls my integrity into question and deflects any specifics until the work week begins. If that doesn’t work, then to hell with you and your firm. Just say the word, and you can have my resignation.”

He looks bored with her, and I want to smack the smug expression from his insincere face. “Ok, dear, no need for histrionics. You’ll do no such thing.” He sighs, and I’ve heard enough. It’s time to intervene.

“Lex,” I call out to announce my presence, “everything ok?” I look between the two of them, but it’s an effort not to send challenge in Sam’s direction.

Alexa rises and attempts her smile, but I can see through the manufactured, fractured construct. “Hey, uh,” she hesitates slightly before adding, “Mateo, I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” She looks to Sam, who’s fixes his gaze on me in expectation, then back to her again. “Sam was just leaving.”

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The man smiles, ignoring Alexa as he strides towards me to extend a hand. “I’m Sam Stone, and you are?”

I keep my expression cool but cordial as I return his grasp. “Mateo Da Rocha. Looks as though I’ve caught you on your way out. Perhaps we can get acquainted another time.”

I keep the smile on my face open, but it’s clear he’s overstayed his welcome – at least in Alexa’s eyes. He offers me a tight-lipped smile and nods.

“Yes, well, I look forward to our next meeting. And Lexi dear, do give some more thought to what we discussed. I’ll see myself out.”

She stands staring after him for a few moments before slamming her phone on the table and her head shortly after.

“Don’t think about it – not now anyway. Let’s go find some trouble to get into.”

I try to get her to explain her tense exchange with Sam, but she waives me off and promises to talk more later. We try to include her boys in our plans, but they roundly reject us in favor of video meet-ups with friends and their collective determination to protect and defend their vibe, which we apparently were threatening. In truth, I think it was a scheme concocted to give us some time to ourselves, but I’m not questioning this gift. Luke seems to be directing this odd behavior, so probing is definitely in order when the time is right. About an hour later, the boys ask if they can go hang out with Luke at his place a few miles away. After Alexa agrees and preaches her mother’s gospel, we settle beside a fire to ease the chill in the air and sit before the flames wrapped in a blanket.

“What’s on your mind? You’re wandering and I want you back here with me.”

I pull her a bit closer so I can drag my teeth lightly across her collarbone, shocking her sensitive places back into full awareness. I chuckle and lock her in place as she tries to wiggle from my hold.

“Again, with the control issues, girl. Do you always have to be in charge?”

“Shush, Da Rocha,” she growls back, jabbing me playfully in the abs with her elbow. “You’re messing with my chi.”

“Baby, you have no idea what I could do for your chi.”

“I haven’t decided whether that’s a gift or a curse,” she replies, trying unsuccessfully to keep the smile out of her voice as she finally breaks my grasp.

“What?”

“Your unique ability to lace a simple statement with suggestions of sex.”

I laugh and bring a finger up to stroke her face. “It’s not my fault that you react a certain way when you hear my voice. That may just be the way that you see me, or, to be more accurate, hear me.”

“Damn you and your psycho-centric explanations! You have to admit that you just made something innocuous sound seductive. Hot. But still seductive.”

“Uh uh. Don’t blame me for your one-track mind, girl.”

“Because, of course, it’s all on me. Anyway,” she says with a swat to my chest, “My mind is right here.”

I bring my lips to her neck and plant a soft kiss. “It is, in part, but there’s something else on your mind. I feel it. So, out with it. Still worrying over Sam?”

Alexa shakes her head vigorously. “No. But I am looking ahead. By refusing to give in to his demands, I’ve posed a challenge. I’ve seen this show before. If I don’t make the next move, he’ll think he’s gotten his way.”

“Ok,” I prompt, not sure where she’s heading.

She draws in a deep breath, her resolve clear, her mood grim, and I want to rip at something for taxing her soul this profoundly.

“Deciding not to reply is Hedge’s right, of course. But I can’t figure out how Trent has forced Sam’s hand. Regardless, I get to decide whether and how I hop on deck to clean up. They’d all have me lie and sidestep the truth. It’s what Hedge believes he should get in return for his monthly retainer. Sam, Sydell, and several others at the firm would probably agree. But they’re not the ones on the line here. They’re not being asked to set aside their integrity to shield a man like Hedge. It may sound naïve, but I feel like it’s immoral for him – for anyone – to ask and expect me to do that.”

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“There’s the problem, Lex. You’re assuming that’s something they subscribe to.”

“What, morality? Come on, Mateo. Everyone understands morality. Everyone has a moral compass, even if it’s skewed.”

“Possibly. But I think it’s easy for powerful men like Sam and Hedge to look past morality as little more than an inconvenience. An accessory. To them, morality plays around the fringes of what matters most – which is power, influence, maybe greed. They turn a blind eye to what’s right and focus solely on what they want. Damn anything that stands between them and their goals. And over time, caring about anyone, anything or any potential consequence becomes a luxury.”

She stares back at me as she processes my words. Despite my Catholic roots, I’m not religious. But I know what’s right. I know what’s wrong. I choose to play things straight because it’s just easier that way. I don’t have to worry about shit like karma, bad vibrations, or whatever forces may dictate the consequences of being a bad actor. This is probably the thing I appreciate most from my upbringing because it’s the one lesson my father unwittingly taught me well. He showed me precisely who I didn’t want to be because the consequences of being foul are soul scarring. He may have become the most powerful man within his circle of influence, maybe even beyond for a time, but he paid a steep price in exchange for the authority he grabbed and continuously flaunted. In the end, he lost both his wives, grew to loathe the son he’d molded in his image, and lost the other, and if what I’m told is true, he lost his hold on all he thought he’d built when his secrets found the light. He died alone and broken.

I don’t like seeing Alexa like this, so sullen and unsure. Doubting yet seeking permission to feel her justifiable angst. So, I let her know as much.

“You know it’s ok to feel the way you’re feeling, right? You don’t need to justify it to anyone. The thing that makes most sense to you is the best answer, and you don’t owe anyone else shit.”

Her smile is easy, open, and warm. “How do you do that, Mateo?”

“Do what?”

“Make the world make sense,” she says, waving her hands in the air in circles, “make all the stupidity swirling around seem so simple and insignificant?”

“Don’t give me that much credit, love,” I say. I’m shocked and goddamned flattered that she feels I can do that for her. I shrug and put it as simply as I know how.

“Sometimes I think it’s easier for other people to sort through our issues. We can get lost in our heads, especially when we’re trying so hard to do the right thing.”

“I don’t know,” she says, taking a long sip of her drink. I grab her hand and squeeze gently as worry gathers in her eyes. “There’s a lot tied up in this. I have my own worries to be sure, but they’re not so easy to separate from some of the bigger issues.”

“That’s because you’re trying to manage your people pleasing tendencies against your personal convictions.”

She closes her eyes, but her face remains etched with worry. It’s like she’s trying to ward off a demon she can’t shake, so I wait for her to say more about what’s weighing her down. The golden light in her eyes is overcast with a darker, stormier haze when she opens them again.

“As if I have a choice,” she says with a humorless laugh. “It’s what I signed up for when my stupid ass agreed to act as interim managing director. I guess this turmoil is no less than what I deserve.”

“So, quit.” I’ve talked around this since she first mentioned she’d agreed to take this position. I don’t think it’s at all what she wanted. But something or someone pressured her to yes. She finishes her drink and purses her lips.

“I’ve thought about it. But I feel like I’d be letting Sam down.”
“Would that be the worst thing?”

Alexa

After refilling my glass, Mateo watches me patiently, allowing me to find my courage, my words, the conviction to put my hurt into intelligible thought. My eyes and head hurt. But keeping this to myself feels like the deeper, more permanent ache. There’s no

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appropriate starting place for this story, so I just jump to the punchline.

“Sam’s my biological father.”

Mateo shows little surprise. It’s more like confirmation of the truth I’ve evaded for so long. I’m taken back to a few weeks ago when we played our silly version of Two Truths and a Lie. I’d told him there was a deeper story to my parentage, so perhaps he’s done the math and deduced the truth. He couldn’t have figured out the messier parts of this story, a grim fairy tale I’ve shared with no one until this point. I take a healthy drink from my glass and begin to unwind my origin story and how I stumbled upon it.



22 Years Ago

Graduation is just a week away, and I’m chasing a strange sense of loss and sadness at that fact. I’ve spent the past four years isolated in one of the most beautiful nooks of the college world, and though I won’t exactly miss the work or the endless competition, I’m going to miss Charlottesville desperately. I should be at the beach now with Lindy and our friends, enjoying the last days of freedom before diving into adulthood. But my recent break up with cheating-ass Cole and some unnamed need to be at home made that a non-option for me.

So, I followed my heart’s lead back home, into the dragon’s lair as I’ve come to refer to it. I’m not sure what I expected to find in a place where love and acceptance were tightly rationed in exchange for fealty and submission. I’ve never been much on either, so it’s probably no wonder that I have no idea what a healthy relationship looks like. My official check in with Papa Frank was oozing with the polite indifference I’ve come to expect from the man, so I’ve decided to go out and run. I’ve got no destination or anywhere to be, so I let my feet take the lead.

After nearly 10 miles, I find myself outside my familiar place of comfort, the home of Sam and Didiane Stone. He’d been a fixture at our house when I was a little girl, but that all changed around the time I turned 10. In the years that followed, I’d found any and

every reason to slip away to see this charming couple. They'd become my favorite people in the world, and during my high school years, this was my default happy place. But with Didiane's cancer diagnosis and waning prospects for recovery, I'd kept a careful distance since leaving for college. They had enough to deal with without having to help some headstrong teen sort through mommy and daddy issues. I'm not sure what I'm hoping to find today, but a change, any change I suspect, will help improve my outlook.

I find Didiane in her rose garden out back.

"*Bonjour,*" I greet and am immediately shocked by the gaunt, haunted shell of a woman who turns at the sound of my voice. I'm equally shocked at the momentary look of distress and maybe even hatred that I think I find in her eyes. We've always maintained a cordial relationship, and at times, I even thought of her as a surrogate mother. Familiarity and warmth quickly replace the contempt I'm sure I just witnessed as she labors the few steps to greet me.

"Ah, the soon-to-be graduate," she replies, grabbing my hands and dropping kisses to each cheek. "Ready to conquer the world?"

"I don't know about that, Didi. But I'm planning to give it my best. Did I catch you in the middle of something?"

She shakes her head. "No, nothing I can't return to later." She considers me for a time. It's like she's debating or wrestling with herself. "Come and sit, Sandrine," she offers, using an obscure diminutive form of my name that she's come to favor over the years. "We have much to discuss."

I take a seat in the picturesque gardens. Next to fall, this is the best time of year for Didiane's prized rose garden, which boasts a mix of bold and delicate scents and fragile and ostentatious blooms, all meticulously pruned and cultivated like the lady herself. I help myself to a glass of water from the ever-present decanter she keeps on hand and dive in.

"What's new, pussycat?"

In place of the smile I usually get in response to the question, she eyes me closely as she takes a seat in the garden chair across from me. "I am dying."

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I lean forward to reach for her hands, but she sits back in her chair and away from my reach. “This should not be news to you.” She looks away for a second before pressing on.

“But what I’m about to tell you may well be. I shouldn’t be the one to say this, but I know that Samson never will because he’s too much of a coward to face you or the truth. I won’t go to my grave without having you know the truth and the pain it’s caused.”

“Not sure what you’re getting at, Didi.” I’m spooked by the direction of her conversation, and something in her tone warns me to pull up my shields.

The smile she offers in response is cold and sharp, sending a chill through my veins. “Sam’s your father, girl. If you’re honest with yourself, this won’t come as a complete shock.”

I hear my heart beating in my ears as my brain processes her words, her tone, and her intent.

“He never recovered from the poison of loving your mother,” she continues, and clearly, she believes this is somehow my fault. “That truth, and by association, you, are the reason my marriage has always been a lie. It took me years to figure it out. But your mother is the reason he’ll never love me the way I’ve loved him.”

She seeks to wound me, a fact so in conflict with the person I’ve believe her to be, and for some reason, this is the first question I need answered.

“And your solution is to lash out at me it seems.” My tone is as flat as hers, but I’m unapologetic thanks to Franklin Winston’s influence. “We’ll get to the truth of your claim in a minute, but what’s your motivation in sharing this with me, Didiane?”

Clearly, this is not what she was expecting, and her eyes, body language, and demeanor shrink at my response. This is more in keeping with the woman I’d learned to confide in, to trust, and to look up to. I could blame the cancer for this sudden change in personality. I think I’ve heard about cases in which the cancer affects the parts of a person’s brain that control their personality. But that’s little consolation now as I resist the urge to back away from this news like some cornered, threatened animal.

“It’s time you became enlightened, my dear. You are a woman now. There are things you should know.”

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And this is what she sets out to do. Over the next few minutes, she answers the questions that my grandparents, who are my adoptive parents, were never willing to explore with me when I discovered at the age of 10 that I'd been adopted during one of my rainy-day snooping sessions in our attic. My adoption papers, stashed beneath a box marked BALLROOM COSTUMES, tipped me to the fact that Magdalene, or Magda, the person I'd believed to be my sister, was actually my mother. I'll never forget the stubborn reluctance that clung to Mama Esperanza's face even as I stood in her bedroom in full hysterics with the evidence of my true origins in hand. She rocked back and forth in her glider as she resigned herself to telling me that Magda had given birth to me out of wedlock. To keep her dreams of becoming a renowned painter intact, Mama and Papa Frank agreed to raise me, freeing Magda to span the globe and secure her place in the art world. I was never to speak of it publicly or even to them. Magda would forever remain my sister, both in the eyes of the world and within the confines of our family tree.

She never mentioned Sam. Ever.

Of course, I knew that Sam had been Franklin's teaching assistant, and that job required him to spend lots of time outside of the classroom and at our house doing the good professor's bidding. But Didiane fills in the all-important blanks. Somewhere along the way, he'd fallen for Magda, who was 17 at the time. The two began a questionable affair, which only came to light when she became pregnant with me. Despite the five-year age difference, and perhaps in response to Franklin's threat to have Sam arrested for having sex with an underage girl, Sam wanted desperately to marry Magda.

The offer placated Franklin but apparently repulsed Magda. The love she'd declared for Sam seemingly was as transient as her attention span. She declined his repeated proposals, shunned his endless declarations of love, and determined to give me up for adoption once I was born. My grandmother, Esperanza, intervened, not wanting her granddaughter's upbringing left to strangers. Franklin pushed back violently at first, not wanting to take on child-rearing responsibilities this late in his life but would

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ultimately relent as he did with most anything his darling Esperanza and dearest Magda desired. It was a nice, neat, tidy little ending for young Magda, who took off for France before the ink on the adoption papers could dry. Sam, it seems, was a whole-ass mess after that, nearly losing his TA post at George Washington as he fell deep into depression. But then he happened upon his golden parachute at a bar one night when he met Dick Storey. Shortly after that, he met Didi, an advertising photographer, at a client shoot and they immediately hit it off. Didi knew she was more invested than Sam, who remained heartbroken over Magda's rejection. Nevertheless, she put Sam back together over the next few years.

"Your mother got to him, got under his skin, and he never, ever came back from that. I was simply—"

"Didi!" I hear Sam's booming voice roaring from behind. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

His handsome face was twisted with fear, his golden eyes dark with fury as his hands tore at his sandy hair, making me shudder even as Didiane stood fully triumphant in his reproach.

"Something you should have had the balls to do years ago, Samson."

She nods to me, gives Sam a sad, resigned look and rises to move past him and into the house. I'm not sure how much time passes before I find my voice and ask for confirmation.

"Is it true, Sam?"

He stares at me but says nothing. Instead, he turns to go after Didiane. I'm left alone in the garden, angry, scared, and more alone than I'd ever felt in my life.



Present Day

Mateo

This is the trouble with secrets. Though not lies, per se, they tend to have the same devastating effect on the explorers who discover their existence. I decide to be gentle yet direct with Alexa.

“So, your disappointment isn’t new. But something’s changed. Tell me where your head’s at, love.”

Her smile is sad, like it costs her the world to speak the words aloud. “Since that day in the garden with Didi, I’ve been waiting for Sam to admit what we both know is true. When he asked me to work for him, I think I wanted that to be a turning point. But all he cares about is putting the right spin on things.”

“That’s what PR’s about, right?”

“That’s just it, Mateo. He’s the same in his personal life. He painted his perfect world and expected his wife to live with his emotional deception and denials like they didn’t exist. Truth be damned, he weaves fantasies free from consequences, conflicts, and precious few real emotions. Everything is neat and tidy, and when the gremlins appear to try and shake things up, he strikes them down with lies and cover stories.”

Though she’s talking to me, she’s also thinking aloud. She needs this time and space to say things I suspect she’s kept locked inside for years.

“He’s not alone in his games, though. I’ve played along willingly, hoping that if I did, one day he’d stop the pretense. I figured that if this was the only way to have him in my life, then I’d have to live with it. I know better. I’ve always known better.”

She shakes her head in frustration, swatting at the stubborn tears purging the emotional poison from her soul. I put down my glass and reach for her, drawing her between my legs and wrapping her up tight. She leans into me, taking the comfort she needs as she begins to digest the reality that she’s tried to keep at bay her whole life. As much as she’s focused on her pain, I also need her focused on how much she means to me and the fact that I’m always here to help her bear the weight when she can’t. And even if she can, I want to be this for her.

“I never saw Didiane again.” Her disconnected thought takes me by surprise. “She died while I was away in grad school the next year. I used my physical distance and school obligations as a convenient reason to skip her funeral. But she was right, you know. Sam is still in love with Magda.”

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I pocket her last statement for the time being. “If you’d seen her again, what would you have said?”

“I’d have thanked her for telling me what no one else would. And I’d probably have apologized for being the indirect cause of her sadness. For a long time after my grandmother died, Didi was the closest thing I had to a constant, stable mother figure. She’d always kept her walls up, always letting me know that I wasn’t hers. Still she did stand in that gap somewhat, and it was better than nothing.”

I bring her a little closer and drop a kiss to the top of her head. “What do you need most to feel better, love? Admission or closure?”

Her laugh in response is humorless. “I want to wash away the feeling that I’m some dirty little secret, that I’m a mistake they somehow needed to redact. I’ve been running from this feeling my entire life, and I’m tired of playing the role as it was written for me.”

“Then it’s time to improvise. You get to decide how it plays, Lex. No one but you.” I let a few moments pass before circling back to what she said earlier.

“And Magda? Where does she factor in all of this?”

She turns to face me, a look of pained resignation in her eyes. “Some mountains are too huge to scale, Mateo. Maybe someday. But not now.”

Realizing this may be enough show and tell for the moment, I try to find a pivot for us. “Of course, love. Then what do you say we find a movie? I’ll keep the wine flowing so we don’t have to think about anything you don’t want to.” And then, because I can’t not fuck with her, I cup and squeeze her sweet ass and bring her closer.

“I’m sure I can find other diversions, too.”

She curls into me, going limp at my suggestion. I stroke her back with my other hand, and she’s like a cat surrendering to the pleasure of being handled and petted. I’m thinking now that any movie watching can wait as her soft parts curl into my hard places.

Chapter 21

From the *Washington Post* magazine
Sunday, October 6

Wilson Hedgepeth has built his reputation in the business world as a straight shooter. Direct and, by many accounts, ruthless, Hedgepeth, known familiarly as Hedge, employs the playbook of a bygone era, steamrolling through deals and relationships, but instead of acting like the straight shooter he claims to be, he wields a six shooter and drips with as much sweat and malice as a spaghetti-western villain. One doesn't find praise and admiration when examining the man and his motivations. Instead, his associates old and new memorialize his acerbic personality, his callous indifference to anything beyond his pursuits and self-aggrandizement, his blatant disregard for keeping his word and his penchant for exacting revenge when none of these things conforms with his myopic and defiantly narcissistic worldview.

Despite what Hedgepeth and those like him seem to believe, these behaviors may have become normalized, but they're not the building blocks of business success in the 21st century. Exhibit 1: HedgeCo's balance sheets. Though his bluster would suggest otherwise, Hedgepeth's businesses haven't turned a profit in four years. Or, to be blunt, HedgeCo bleeds a deep, money green and is in desperate need of a transfusion to remain a viable force in the energy arena. The cluster of companies continues to reel from its disaster of a foray into

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fracking off the coast of Virginia last year; by some estimates, his careless insistence on pushing that project will cost upwards of \$15 billion to aid in the region's recovery. But, because he's so completely overleveraged, say several associates who spoke frankly with the Post in return for anonymity, it's unlikely he'll have the necessary resources to foot such a pricey bill – now or ever. He's exhausted his relationships with banks and has approached a few like-minded entrepreneurs with limited success as he pulse checks others' willingness to collaborate. Angel funding might also be an option, sources say, though at this point, it appears the archangel Gabriel himself would need to breathe new life into the foundering empire to sustain its viability long-term.

Sage's article goes on like this for a bit. It's undeniably a great read, and I can take no issue with his reporting – in part or whole. My own sour feelings about Hedge aside, Sage's profile is spot on, capturing the essence of a man in severe isolation and his motivations to be a dominant player on the global stage. The string of hard facts and deeply sourced evidence is certain to piss off Hedge. But as they say, truth hurts.

Things get truly interesting towards the latter quarter of the article.

No stranger to controversy, Hedgepeth doesn't seem to care whether his name is used for good or for ill. In fact, when asked recently about this, he was proud and certain in his reply: "You'll have to convince me that all publicity isn't good publicity. You gotta keep 'em talking about you. That's the only true measure of a win. You may hate me, but you can't keep my name from your lips. That makes me a winner – all day. Every day."

The Hedgepeth name does indeed slither across numerous discussions, many of which raise questions of legality and, in at least a few, consistent cases, morality. Based on months of reporting, forensic investigation, and presumed victims' accounts, Hedgepeth is alleged to have been linked to several young women who accuse him of everything from gross moral turpitude to sexual assault or rape. According to two former HedgeCo executives, you won't hear about any of this because either Hedgepeth, his surrogates or some combination of the two appear to have bought the silence of those who've been tipped off or have uncovered tales of what's seemingly known as his "little girl panty

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fantasy.” He is markedly mum when asked why he’s being linked with such actions.

“He likes the young ones,” said a deeply entrenched member of HedgeCo’s leadership team, who asked for anonymity in exchange for frank insights into the company and its founder. “There’s trail after trail of evidence to support this. It’s probably the worst-kept secret in the great state of Texas. You won’t hear about it, though, because plenty have been paid a small fortune to keep it out of the news.”

The Post has obtained receipts for three wire transfers apiece to editors of the Dallas Morning News, the San Antonio Express-News, Dallas magazine and the Houston Chronicle. Representatives from the publications declined to comment for this piece.

During a recent interview, Hedgepeth categorically denied these and any related allegations. He, too, refused to comment, offering across-the-board denials when asked for a response.

I was winded when I finished reading Sage’s *Washington Post* piece but also found myself strangely energized. This beast of a story contained all the elements I’d been dreading. Yet, the proverbial boogey man didn’t come close to living up to his gloss. Though I very much remain a surrogate to this story, this fight is not mine. Others aren’t likely to see things my way, and that’s fine.

So far this morning, I’ve missed six calls in total. Three are from Sam. I’ve excused myself to my den while Mateo, Luke, and my boys shoot around outside. I take a seat behind the dark floating desk, tap the first voice message, and close my eyes as I listen to Sam Stone’s voice pleading for yet another reset in our relationship.

Sam: Lexi, dear. You’ll see that I’ve been trying to reach you. I’m sure you’re still upset but do call me back. I haven’t handled our situation well, I know, and there are many things to be considered and discussed. But first, we’ll need to handle this Hedgepeth thing. Then, we can figure everything else out. Give me a call when you listen to this.

Not surprisingly, Sam’s order of operations reveals his true priorities. *Ever heard of PEMDAS, asshole?* My obscure musings bring a much-needed dose of humor to the situation, which

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continues to fester and ooze like an open wound. I file this away for now as I sift through the next couple of messages. Sage, as promised, has called to let me know that his piece appears in today's *Post* magazine and wants my thoughts when I get time to chat. The other is a message from Bates Richardson, HedgeCo's chief operating officer. It's marked urgent and was left about an hour ago. His tone is dire and drips privilege and entitlement. I hate being addressed in this way, as if I'm an ever-ready hired gun with nothing more important to do than wait until I'm deemed useful enough to be placed into service. On the one hand, this is exactly what I am as the outside consultant engaged to act on my client's behalf whenever necessary. What I take issue with is the lack of respect that comes with playing this role. From my vantage point, I'm here to listen, advise and offer up the best way to make the best impression as I reveal useful truths when my clients are called to task for their actions. My clients would prefer me to play the useful idiot, however, engaging me to speak on their behalf but say little of substantive worth as I peddle a brand of false transparency that gives the appearance of openness all while protecting stark truths behind well-locked gates.

Over the past weeks, it's become increasingly clear to me that I'm ill-suited to this. My brain is neither conniving nor quick enough to deflect the incoming shots with irrelevant message points, and my will is too strong to ignore this reality or refrain from bringing it to the client's attention. For me, falling in line with what I view as hypocrisy is the ultimate self-deception. Sadly, this is my job – at least for now.

Mateo

Though I'd hoped time at the hoop would give me a chance to hang with Alexa's boys some more, Luke and I end up chopping it up instead as Tristan, Trace, and Treat scatter to skate and roam around, basketball clearly not their thing. Luke, though, was born to the game. He moves with grace, force, and determination. It's hard not to watch him play, and it's costing me dearly as he jays me up time after time.

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By rights, this could be a cocky kid. He comes across as anything but. Raised by his single mom, Luke lacks hard edges. But he's no gentle giant. Thoughtful and even-tempered, he shows far more respect than one might expect of a teen. Just as present are his intensity and ferocity, which I expect might take him by surprise when he finally realizes the full measure of their power. That's not to say he doesn't already know he's excellent. Of course, he does.

"Remember that when you see me on the court at Cameron next fall," he taunts as he fakes to get past me to fade away on his left and score – again. I catch the ball as it falls through the net and begin to dribble.

"So, it's Duke, then?"

I pick up my dribble and bounce the ball his way. He catches it and with both hands, he brings the ball to his chest to rest.

"Yeah, for me and 500 others. It's why I stayed here to play when mom moved to teach full time at UVA."

With a chance to win a championship in their division, Luke's basketball team, and more important, Luke, would be watched by schools, scouts, and fellow players once the season kicked off. At first, Lindy had been willing to commute the two hours between Charlottesville and Ashburn to keep from having to uproot Luke. But because Alexa is the most magnanimous person who ever roamed the Earth, she offered to let Luke live with her. It wasn't an immediate sell, but Alexa eventually convinced Lindy and folded Luke into her routines and responsibilities seamlessly.

"Since we're sharing," he says, "I need you to know something. About Auntie. She's the strongest woman I know." He pauses and flashes a sheepish smile. "Don't let my mom know I said that," he chuckles, "but yeah. She was always there for us when I was little even though she had this crazy schedule. When my mom was preparing to defend her doctoral thesis, Alexa was always there to step in to take care of me. Trent didn't seem to like it when we were around or that we were always among her priorities, and so I hear he gave her much shit about it. When she was finally liberated from that freak, mom and I got to give back a little of what she gave to us. We grabbed up the bros on weekends to give

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Auntie a chance to just be. I don't know. Go on dates or whatever. She might have done that I don't know two, three times. Then she just seemed to give up. Locked down her emotions."

He stops talking for a moment and looks at me earnestly.

"That smile on her face today? I think that's because of you. Just knowing that swamp freak Trent was enough to leave me with emotional scars. I've heard my mom say how fragile Alexa must be after her time with him. But you know, no one knows for sure. She doesn't talk about those times much, but I know that they had a profound effect on how she views certain things."

I need to let the young man know I understand him and his warning to be careful with Alexa.

"It takes someone who's been damaged to see it in others, I think. So yes, I see it, Luke. Always have." *And apparently, you do as well.*

"So, you'll take care of her."

"As much as she'll let me, yes."

"Ha ha! Facts."

When Luke, the boys, and I raid her cabinets and refrigerator for snacks a while later, I occasionally hear her voice buzzing in the background. She's all business and, at times, biting as she manages what seems to be a difficult conversation. It takes my entire restraint not to commandeer her and give her shelter from the barrage of hand grenades being lobbed her way. I grab a seat at the kitchen table and take the time to search and read the article that's been giving her angst. I typically don't read magazines outside of the academic space. But I've got to hand it to Vanucci. This shit's compelling and one hell of a good story, though I'm probably not going to want to share that with him. Not any time soon anyway.

Next, I return a few texts that I've ignored this weekend. A couple from Becket checking in to see if I got my shit together and fixed things with Lexi. Angry ones from Dez calling me all kinds of mother fuckers for not getting back to him. I assume the messages from unknown senders are probably about politics. It's that time of the year after all, so I open the unknown tab to delete them.

You can't ignore me forever. We need to talk, Teo.

I grit my teeth when I see the text. It makes no sense whatever that Janeilia would reach out again. Not after so long and definitely not after the things I said when I'd first learned she'd married Nico. I want nothing to do with her and won't allow her to confuse things for Alexa and me. She's the proverbial can of worms you never want to open, so I won't reply just yet. I'll need more information before I can even think about giving her any of my time. Like how the hell did she find me or my phone number after so many years.

The sound of Alexa's footfalls drags me from this unwelcome reality. When she returns to the room, she appears more tense than before but not agitated. Resigned yet relieved. I lift my brows in silent question, and she walks over and drops gracefully into a chair at the table beside me.

"It could be worse. Much worse," she says, diving in without preamble. She shrugs and recrosses her legs. "Sage's piece is amazing. It's accurate – at least as far as painting a portrait of Hedge goes."

I nod. "Then that's good, no?"

"Oh, it is. At least in part. Hedge's number two did give me some shit, thinks I should be trying to shut down any and all coverage."

"And will you? Try to keep other news organizations from coming out with their own versions?"

She shakes her head and slices a hand through the air. "Sage separated the issues surrounding Hedge in a way that will allow me to do the same. The firm's head lawyer advises that we not wade into any issues that should be left to law enforcement. So, I'll be intentional in my messaging, keeping strictly to things that reinforce HedgeCo's mission to create a global energy revolution. That doesn't include anything even slightly close to the sex allegations. Not my monkey. Not my circus."

"You sound certain. And satisfied," I observe, happy that she's found at least some sort of peace as she wades through the madness.

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Her answering smile is rueful, letting me know that she may not feel comfort, but she is resigned to her decision. “As certain as I can be.” She considers me as she speaks then narrows her eyes. “But something’s up with you. You’re not—” She pauses as she continues to size me up. “I don’t know, but something’s up. Tell me. Get my mind off my troubles for a sec.”

I blow out a rush of air, both relieved and slightly perplexed that just as I see her clearly, she can read me just as well. So, I show her Janeilia’s text and tell her that it puts me on edge.

“Based on what you’ve told me about her, you’re right not to trust her. But it sounds like she’s not going to stop reaching out until you hear what she has to say.”

I purse my lips. “You’re right. But I won’t give her the chance to catch me off guard again.”

Act Four: Coming Undone

A Moment with Truth

What's that? Over there in the limelight? Oh, that's just me, alongside your worst decisions.

So, now come, because we have lots to cover this time. The course of Hedge's story can't come as a surprise. But to recap just in case: if you scheme too hard, too fast, or too deep, then you and I one day are sure to have our close-up while you watch the world around you unravel as your life transforms. What may not be as apparent: the change doesn't have to be a bad one.

I'm keeping my eye on Hedge and wonder if he's noticed Anxiety looming in the background. As she sets the scene for what's to come, his mood has soured by degrees, a sure sign that he's begun to realize that he can outrun me no longer. I know he knows what's coming, but he still hasn't embraced the gravity of his impending fall. His phone continues to ring with urgency, an overture to the coming act of this human tragedy. He's not ready to hear it, though.

I imagine these have been moments of great pain for Hedge, stuck in place for now, tethered to his truth as his grasp on his narrative unwinds. Is it wrong that this is my happy place? He

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should be embracing the peace that comes with releasing deception. But who am I kidding? He hasn't even embraced Accountability. She says he's still looking to shift the blame for his dilemma, and Alexa looks like a good place to park that angst.

Did I mention that we've noticed, Accountability and I, that there's this panic that sets in when its time for me to take the stage? Why does everyone expect the worst when Truth is on the scene? Why do we always get assigned to the bad-outcomes column? Why couldn't this be the start of a beautiful friendship? Or maybe something a little more serious? I mean, yeah, sure, getting to know me might hurt a little, but it's for your own good.

Don't believe me? Watch what happens with the world that Mateo has carefully constructed and compartmentalized for himself. He used the lessons of his past to protect himself from future heartache, packing each hurtful memory into its own compression chamber, squeezing it of relevance, relegating it to obscurity. Too bad life doesn't work that way, no matter how attentive one might be to shit-proofing himself. He can't know that these tidbits, so deceptively opaque and irrelevant, will have the most profound bearing on his future with Alexa unless he handles them thoughtfully. He's not comfortable with so much light on chapters of his life that he'd prefer go unpublished. But there's not much he can do to halt the presses. I'm pulling for him, but Accountability's not so sure. She'd been adamant that her historic lack of influence over Mateo meant that he'd keep the news of Janeila's return and her baby-daddy claims quiet. She was, of course, wrong. Still, she insists that his telling Alexa about this is a fluke as the small details of his life return to have their proper finale.

There are lessons ahead for Alexa as well as the truths she's kept to the background continue to vie for her attention. She'll confront the realities of her life's story and the fiction she's accepted as fact even as she knew the truth. About most of it anyway. The roles she's played she's played willingly and deliberately. She's delivered each line as written. I wonder if she'll see the irony there, that even as she waits for Sins of the Past to

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surface, Morally Complicit needs a moment of her time to talk things through.

Meanwhile, Honesty sits quietly, gracefully observing how all these arcs might play out and find resolution. She's removed herself from our group chat on Hedge, though. That may mean he's beyond redemption, but I have a sense that he has some role yet to play, even if it's a cameo in a cautionary tale.

Chapter 22

Thursday, October 10
Alexa

Between battling the pressures and challenges from work and home, the past several days have been a whirlwind of stress, activity, and attitudes. I've spent more time at my desk and on the phone with reporters than I'd care to as the world continues to close in on Wilson Hedgepeth. He's apparently in hiding, refusing to meet with us in person until the fell winds howling news of his coming demise shift in his favor, but that's not likely to happen soon. As if Sunday's magazine portrait wasn't enough, the *Post's* opinion page followed on Tuesday with a strongly worded viewpoint lamenting the fact that moral compass doesn't play a stronger role when corporate investors decide where to plant their support. Though HedgeCo wasn't the only corporation cited for turning a blind eye to its leaders' aberrant deeds and abhorrent ethics, it was hard to miss the messaging clearly excoriating Hedge for his actions and refusal resign and face the consequences.

Though there are no new angles to this story, it won't go away any time soon. I've woven as many non-stories and distractions as

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I can, and as expected, most of the intrigue for reporters skulks around the allegations of Hedge's sexual proclivities. I've kept official statements general, asserting that HedgeCo's executives are committed to the organization's continued operations, staying on mission, delivering value to investors, yada yada, while these allegations are investigated by the appropriate parties for their veracity and validity. Even that's more than I'd intended to say, but I think I did a good enough job keeping the issues distilled. Hedge needs to show himself, and I've tried but failed to get him to work with the firm to defuse any grenades that may remain out in the wild. He won't, of course, demanding that I or someone else at the firm make the appropriate denials and express outrage on his behalf while he remains in seclusion. I haven't capitulated to that demand. I won't allow anyone here to do so either. That's why he's been blustering and threatening to fire Storey|Fischer all week, but he won't do that. As the kids would say, no one's checking for him right now. On top of that, he probably couldn't afford their price tag. Admittedly, I don't know how deep Hedge's rainy-day coffers go, but his liquidity seems to be evaporating at an alarming rate. His comptroller has tightened all financial processes and protocols indefinitely, and HedgeCo's stock, already struggling prior to Sunday's bombshell article, has reached an all-time low. This morning Moody's Investors downgraded the company's bond rating to Baaa3, which, while still investment grade, places HedgeCo's valuation a hair's breadth away from junk-bond status. He needs us, and I take no pleasure at all in that reality.

If any good has come of the Hedge debacle, it's the fact that I have a ready excuse to deflect Sam Stone's continuing overtures. Sam values appearances above almost all else, so I'd be surprised if he risked my ire by approaching me here in the office. He's left several voice messages asking for time to talk, but unless he's moved his position, there's nothing to discuss. I feel trapped within a closed loop of raw emotions and dubious decisions, but life on this habitrail is more appealing than pinning any further hopes on a dying fantasy. We'll never acknowledge the truth of our relationship.

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I'll take my resolve for a test drive later today when I see him at the executive team meeting. I don't expect anyone will want to fire him as a client, but it's clear that the firm may need to change its approach in handling Hedge in the coming days and weeks. As I sit at my desk considering the many ways this could play, I wonder whether I've come to the end of my useful life here or at any other firm like it for that matter. I don't get the chance to explore that idea because Trey Jackson enters my office wearing an expression so animated it looks as if he'll explode from excitement.

"If you're in the middle of something, girl, stop now. I have the tea."

His face displays a mix of excitement and indictment, and I'm not certain I'll want to hear whatever it is he's learned. His excitement vibrates through him so fiercely he might bounce off the ground in anticipation. In no mood to play games, I raise a brow and make a circular motion with my hand encouraging him to drop the theatrics and get on with dishing.

"The Austin police department has opened an investigation into Hedge."

That's no surprise but hearing this from Trey is. "According to whom?"

He preens, visibly proud of what he's come to learn. "I have a connection to someone who works dispatch for the local police down there. I asked her to let me know if anything developed. They're trying to keep it under wraps but it's most definitely a thing. And that's not all." I realize that I need to brace myself for whatever comes next when he finally takes one of the club chairs in front of my desk and sits back with a smug look on his face.

"Do I have to torture this news from your throat, Trey?"

He tsks. "There is no need for violence, girl. But since you don't seem to appreciate my dramatic build up, here it is. You're about to get steam rolled in your meeting this afternoon. I heard Sydell and Jackson complaining that you're not doing enough to protect Hedge and his corporate interests. They've convinced Dick Storey that unless you take steps, you should be forced out of the director's chair."

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That may not be most of the executive team, but it's enough dissent to create fresh problems that I have no desire to take on. I'm not sure how long I sit calculating my options before Trey's voice breaks the silence. "Alexa, you still with me? I mean, say something. It's a bit creepy just sitting here while you plot world destruction."

I smile and shake my head. "Sorry, Trey. I got lost in my thoughts for a second."

"No time for that. What are you going to do?"

"Not certain. But your source was certain that there's an investigation into Hedge?"

He frowns. "I wouldn't have told you about it if I wasn't certain. You know this."

I hold up my hands in apology. "Yes, I know. But I have to be certain, especially with this wily bunch. I know you understand that."

The feathers I've rustled seem to settle as Trey's spine relaxes. He gives me a weak nod and shrugs off my unintended slight.

"You know I'm always on your side, right? And in case there was any doubt, hear me now," he says, clapping between each of the last three words for emphasis. "Sydell is a bitch, always been a bitch, always gonna be a bitch. Jackson's ass is a snake. When they combine their evil forces, you got a snake ass bitch, and you need to come armed and ready to strike before they do."

He leans forward in his seat, placing his forearms on his thighs, his eyes sincere but still fiery. "You've made this place normal again, gotten more accomplished in a matter of months than anyone's been able to get done in years. I'd hate to see anyone fuck up your program for any reason, least of all for some jealousy and spite bullshit."

I'm touched by his rare show of sincerity. Trey, usually all bluster and show, truly has been my ally. I need to let him know that I appreciate that always but especially now when allies around here are hard to come by.

"Trey, I don't mean to sound ungrateful or have you think I don't believe you. You've never let me down. Right now, there's just a lot riding on my next decisions, both for the firm and for

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me personally. I'm probably not handling this as well as I could or should. Thank you for sharing this with me."

He waves me off and places a yellow folder on my desk. "Flip through these before your meeting."

I smile, thanking him for having my back.

"It's my pleasure, girl." He hesitates a moment before standing to leave. "You sure you're ok?"

"I'll be fine," I say, knowing he's hoping I'll say more, but I'm not ready to. Not yet. He gives me a quick nod and leaves, and I get down to the business of preparing for the coming ambush.

Chapter 23

Mateo

Worry gathers at the base of my skull as I sit in my office debating my next move. I'd finally decided to return Janeilia's call between my morning classes, and two hours later, I'm still choking back the bile that threatens to spill from my guts. It would seem I have dear Uncle Antonio to thank for her having resurfaced in my life, and we'll deal with that some other time. She insisted that we meet for dinner, but I nixed that quickly, suggesting lunch instead.

I'm seconds from a headache like the ones I used to suffer when I was a boy. It's times like this when I almost appreciate my father's indifference towards me. It further justifies my well-reasoned, well-deserved hatred of him. *He'll feel a lot worse things than a headache, corazon. Don't baby him. Let him learn to suffer. Let the pain build him up. Let him know how exquisite pain can be.*

My parents often had these back-and-forth exchanges, their approaches to caring for me at the center of their dissent and eventual demise. Through adult eyes, I see that I was just one of many reflections of their discontent – not the source of it.

Needing a change of scenery, and perhaps a swift kick in the pants, I decide to take a quick walk to clear my head. I gather my

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phone, keys, and jacket from across the room just as Becket walks in.

“Haven’t seen you for a bit. Everything ok, man?”

“It will be,” I answer, tossing my things on the sofa where I take a seat and gesture for him to do the same in the adjacent chair.

Beck chuckles and shakes his head, obviously amused. “What’s wrong now? You still having girl problems?”

“Nah. It’s not that. Not at all, in fact.” I take the next minutes to catch him up on things with Alexa.

“Glad to hear it, man,” he responds. “About time you two got over yourselves.”

“Yes, it is. And I want to keep it that way.”

“Oh? You fucking up already, Matt?”

I frown at the assumption. “Hell no. It’s nothing like that. But my ex is trying to make trouble, and I’m looking for a way to head her off before she does.” I catch him up on Janeilia’s claims and news of her impending divorce from my brother.

Beck pins me with a stare. “You think she’s here to cause trouble?”

“I know it. I’ve made it clear I don’t have anything to say to her, but she keeps blowing up my phone, so I relented. Agreed to have lunch today to see what she has to say.”

“And because you’re a chronic avoider,” he jumps right in, “you’re dreading this little reunion. Am I right?”

I pull at my neck to try and ease the spasms that intensify my headache.

“I hadn’t planned to pay attention to her, man. The fact that she won’t go away lets me know she’s up to something.”

He sits back in the chair and crosses his arms as he continues sizing me up. I know what that look means, so I brace myself for the coming inquest.

“So, what’s this really about? You still have feelings for her or something else that you’re scared to face?”

I raise my brows in surprise. “No. All I know is that when it comes to her, to my brother, experience has shown it’s best to arm up with information beforehand or risk getting waylaid by their depraved indifference to human life.”

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He laughs at that. “You know, Da Rocha, I didn’t know until recently that you were such a drama queen. I’m beginning to think that falling in love has turned you to mush.”

I sigh, pissed at his jabbing. “Janeilia is two parts mischief and eight parts bullshit. I want to keep that as far away from Lexi as possible, especially right now. She’s got her own shit to handle.”

“Understandable,” he nods, “commendable even. Just make sure you’re upfront with your girl about everything.”

“That doesn’t need to be said, Beck.”

He studies me once more, his face grim, reflecting my mood. “You have a bad feeling about this, yeah?”

I nod, resigned. “I do.” The sound of my phone and Alexa’s pretty face on my screen snap me from my self-torture and rescue me from Beck’s inquisition.

“But it looks like it’s time to take the first step to knock back this obstacle. It’s Alexa.”

He smiles and stands to leave. “Just put it out on the table for her, and you should be fine. Let me know how things go.”

I wave him off as I swipe to answer.

“Ah, love, you have perfect timing,” I purr into the phone, relief flooding through me briefly at the welcome pivot.

She smiles and answers, “Oh, good. I was hoping I wasn’t disturbing your day. But I needed a yummy distraction, and tag, you’re it.”

I laugh and tease, “I’d better be your only distraction, girl.”

She smiles. “Don’t ever wonder. I just need to bitch a little.”

“By all means. Bitch away.”

She sighs and gives me her download. “I’m not even pissed about the planned ambush. I’m tired and can’t see myself being willing to arm up for battle at a moment’s notice day in and day out. Add to that this potential police investigation, and I’m even less inclined to involve myself.”

I shrug and cosign the direction of her thoughts. “So, don’t. Quit.”

She giggles, but I can see she’s not entirely dismissing the idea. “That’s becoming a recurring message with you, Da Rocha.”

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“With good reason. Name one thing you’ve shared with me about your work that makes you happy. Think about it. I’ll wait.”

But she dives right in. “I can’t count what doesn’t exist. But quitting raises the issue of what’s next. And I can’t answer that.”

“Don’t try to. Deal with each issue on its own, and when the time comes, you’ll know what to do.”

“You make it sound simple, as usual.”

“Most of the things we take the time to puzzle over usually are.”

She smiles at me and points to the screen. “Oh yeah? Then what’s got you off your game? I may not have your sight-beyond-sight thing going on, but I know when you’re not yourself. And though you’re here, you’re distracted.”

My grin becomes a grimace. “Busted.” I hold up a hand in surrender. “I got in touch with Janeilia this morning. She insists on talking in person, so we’re having lunch this afternoon.”

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Oh,” she nods, extending the single syllable for long moments, her expression serious and concerned. “She ever heard of FaceTime?”

I give her a lopsided grin. “Believe me, I said as much to her. She was adamant that it’s a personal matter and we need to speak face to face.”

“Alright. How does that make you feel?”

I exhale roughly. “Uncomfortable,” I say, giving her my honest assessment.

She gives me a warm and sympathetic smile, and something in that small gesture gives me the push I need to face this shit with more confidence.

“Well,” she says after a beat, “I’ll make you a deal. You slay your dragon while I slay mine. Then, maybe we can swap battle stories over dinner at my house tonight?”

I laugh, appreciating her support and encouragement. “In other words, I should take a dose of my own advice?”

“Something like that.”

Her smile brightens and is everything I didn’t know I needed. She inspires me to hurdle bullshit, push away any coming threats, and leave them behind. I’ll have to find a way to let her know this.

“Good, then let me dash and sharpen my swords.”

I hear a deep, resonant voice in the distance, and I know she’s no longer alone in her office.

“Swords? Should I be concerned, my dear?”

She looks away from the screen and towards the voice, and my curiosity grows to concern when her face blanches and closes off. She brings her attention back to me and flips into Spanish. “*Ese era mi donante de esperma.*”

I raise my brows at her comment. *That was my sperm donor.* I’d wondered how she’d been handling her issues with Sam Stone, and I guess I have my answer.

“Well, then,” I reply. “*Una obstáculo a la vez, Lexi,*” I say. *One obstacle at a time.*

Her smile is weak and strained. “No doubt,” she answers. “Talk later?”

“Of course, love,” I say, and she ends the call.

I expect our next talk will be a lively one as we chronicle stories from the complications that threaten to fuck up our lives.

Alexa

I take a moment to find my composure after Mateo and I hang up. This is more theatrics on my part than anything else, but I can’t let Sam or any emotional reaction he inspires derail me from the matters that most require my focus today. Or ever really. Color me surprised that he showed his face in my office, but I won’t let on. I greet him with as much disinterest as I can muster.

“What can I do for you?”

My tone does the trick as I observe his posture go unnaturally straight. He slips his hands into the pockets of his perfectly tailored pants, and if I didn’t know better, I’d have regarded the gesture as evidence of his casual dismissal. The tightness in his expression says he’s anything but. He’s unraveling.

“My, so formal. Am I interrupting something, my dear?”

I bristle at the endearment and allow my impatience full reign.

“I was preparing for the meeting this afternoon and still have some bases to cover. Say what you need, Sam.”

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He clears his throat and walks with determination and some defiance to one of the chairs facing my desk. Undeterred by my indifference and impatience, he plants a saccharine smile on his lips, juts out his chin, pulls up his trousers, and takes a seat, suggesting he's planning to be here for longer than I would like to allow.

"We'll get to that," he begins, choosing his words with care and deliberation. He settles into the seat with an air of entitlement that frosts me. "I need you to arrange for someone to watch the boys tonight so we can talk over dinner."

"I have plans this evening. Now, you were saying?"

He sighs with boredom and disinterest, which raises my ire.

"Change them, Lexi. We need to talk about Hedge. Then, we need to clear the air."

"What is it with you and Trent thinking you can order me to do as you say? I'm not ready to have that discussion with you, Sam. I'll let you know when I am. And I expect we'll be talking about Hedge this afternoon, so whatever it is can wait until then. Now if that's all, I have some calls I need to make before walking into what sounds an awful lot like an ambush."

He searches my face, for what I can't say for sure, and presses on.

"Do your plans involve your Dr. Da Rocha? I assume that's who you were talking with when I walked in?"

And there went my last nerve. Sam makes an art of pressing his advantage, and in this case, if my anger is any indication, he's embracing his inner Picasso, determined to paint me into a corner with abstract thought so he can have his way yet again. I won't be goaded into having this discussion until I'm ready. Until I know that it can be productive.

"That's not your business. And Sam," I say, my voice laced with warning, "if you have something to share with me, you'll need to get to your point or excuse me. I find myself in an untenable position and will not be steam rolled when your executive team meets this afternoon. That means I need time alone to work on the problem. That also means that you and I will keep this

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conversation to work related matters only. If that won't work for you, then you'll have to excuse me."

I rise from my desk, more than prepared to hole up in Trey's office if necessary so I can seek some peace while I construct a game plan. A responding smile registers on his lips, yet his eyes dim with hurt and frustration. I move to gather a few things and prepare to leave since it seems he's calling my bluff. As I reach for a note pad and pen, he finally breaks the silence.

"Still so very stubborn," he mutters, though I'm certain he intended the comment for my ears. He clears his throat and adjusts his tie. "Perhaps you can clear your schedule over the weekend then." He gestures to my chair. "For now, please take your seat. You'll want to know what Sydell has planned for this afternoon."

I slowly return to my chair but keep my eyes trained on his to telegraph my distrust and unease with him.

"I'd heard something about that because as ever, good news travels fast. Say more."

He leans forward in his chair, and I lean as far away as I can without scooting my own back from my desk. Noting my reaction to his movement, he grimaces, the reality of our stalemate seeming to take hold of him in a way it apparently hadn't before now. He shakes his head slightly and shares what I've already learned from Trey.

"It seems Sydell's plan isn't news to you. But I also want you to step back and consider that sometimes the right decision may not feel as black and white as you'd like it to be."

"You've confirmed what I heard earlier, and I thank you for that. Now was there anything else?"

He looks away from me and scratches his head, his lips pressed into a thin line, signaling the fact that I've snapped his thread bare composure. This shouldn't please me, but it does. Immensely.

"No, it seems my visit was duplicative," he says finally, his eyes narrowed in fury, "but here's some advice. Grow up, Alexa. You're not the only one with feelings invested here. You think you can put me off. Keep putting off your ex-husband. You need to get your goddamned head out of the sand and face your problems. Stop acting like some spoiled, entitled brat."

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“Fuck you, Samson,” I say angrily because if he’s going to take off gloves, then I’m down for the bare-knuckle fight. “Like my feelings have ever been a priority! And when did you ever care anything about my relationship with Trent? You try walking this Earth feeling like something’s wrong with you because no one wants to claim you as theirs. Ever held on to hope so tightly that you forget to breathe, forget to embrace and love yourself because you’re never quite sure of who you are and why the people who created you are happier living their highly engineered, well-tempered lives than they are admitting the one truth you need desperately to hear? You’ve constructed a beautiful web of deceit and insisted I live inside of it even in the face of truth because you love your self-image more than you could ever love me. I’ve gone along anyway hoping that one day everything would be ok. That one day you might *legitimize* things between us. So no, you don’t get to say when it’s time to clear the air. You don’t get to tell me who I should be talking to. I *will* talk to you at length about our *situation*. But I’ll do it only when I’m ready and able. Today,” I pound my index finger on my desk in a frantic rhythm repeatedly for emphasis, “is not that day, and I think that’s only fair. You’ve had 43 years to get up the nerve to speak to me in truth. And if we’re being honest – and I know that’s a foreign concept for you, so follow closely – it’s only happening now because I forced your hand.”

My heart races as I complete my unplanned rant and search his face for any signs of life, emotion, or remorse. There are none. He wears an implacable mask to shield whatever he’s feeling. That’s when it hits me. People say that the eyes are the windows to the soul. If that’s true, then Sam Stone has none. We’ll remain at loggerheads at least for now as he offers a curt nod and stands to leave. I find I’m not done admonishing and call after him.

“And Sam? You may want to look in the mirror to see who really needs to do some growing and changing.”

Though my words halt his exit, he never turns to acknowledge them, instead stalking to the door and opening it with a little too much force as he leaves.

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I'm not sure how long I sit staring at the door once he's gone, spinning around slowly in my swivel chair from time to time as I roll back the past few minutes. I hadn't been ready to speak with Sam, obviously, and for him to push his agenda without considering that I may not be ready to meet him where he is only proves that I was right to be wary. He either doesn't understand how profoundly it's affected my life to know that he's my biological father but to have him refuse to acknowledge what we both know, or he doesn't care. I am sad, and I am angry. I'm numb, yet my heart aches. But I have no time for this. I need a few more arrows in my quiver before entering the lion's den this afternoon. And with just under two hours remaining, I need to be all steely focus and leave touchy feely for the time when I can afford to let my soft places see the light of day and nurse the blows of the past few minutes.

I use work as my salve, slathering myself in busyness, losing myself over the next hour and a half to my quest for informational firepower. I've confirmed that the Austin PD is trying with waning success to contain its fairly aggressive investigation into Hedge following Sage's piece from last weekend. I shared this with Sage, unwittingly confirming a tip he'd uncovered but hadn't been able to verify. In return for my corroborating details, I managed to finagle a few bits from him that may allow me to resist any attempts to force my hand into making conciliatory gestures that might soften Hedge's public image. Sage's insights are the battlements that will protect my position regarding how we represent Hedge morally and literally. Whether my position here is worth protecting, however, remains an open question which may have found its answer once I see what Sydell and her consorts have in store for me.

Mateo

I get to *La Joya Brasileira* around 1:30, fully 30 minutes earlier than I'd planned to meet Janeilia. This gives me time to sit and think but also to give Mariana a heads up as to why, in the course of a week or so, she's seeing me with two different women. I

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probably shouldn't care about that, but I do. She spots me almost immediately.

"*Olá, pequenino,*" she says, which always makes me chuckle. *Little one.* Though Mari is only a few years older, she's always regarded me more like a son than a business partner. I welcome her embrace, kiss her cheeks, and gesture for her to take the seat across from me.

"Back so soon! And where is your lovely lady?"

"She's working today. You made quite the impression on her, so we'll be back soon."

"Good. Then tell me what brings you here in the middle of the day, Mateo?"

"I'm meeting someone. She said she had some business and needed to see me."

Mariana narrows her eyes at me, her look hardening. "*She?* What kind of friend? And is the "friend," she asks, making air quotes, "the reason you look so troubled?"

"I assure you she's not that kind of friend," I respond quickly. "She's an ex and not to be trusted. Says she has business to discuss in person. So, I thought if I met her here—"

"You'd be on safe ground and have me as a reliable witness. Am I close, *pequenino?*"

"You're spot on, Mari." I shrug. "She's always been the kind of woman who loves to start trouble. I'm here only to find out what she wants so I can deal with it and get on with my life."

"And does Alexa know about this meeting?"

I smile. "Of course, she does. I have nothing to hide from her."

"Keep it that way," she says, banging the table for emphasis. "Take care of your business and let me know what you need."

"Actually, there is something," I say, thinking of Alexa's family. I ask her for one of her decadent desserts to go, and she beams and agrees to get something special ready for me when I tell her why I need it. There's almost nothing that Mariana enjoys more than sharing her food with the world.

I spend the next few minutes clicking around mindlessly on my phone and answering questions from students, anything I can do to keep myself from thinking about all the ways that this could go

left. The inelegant click-clack of heels lumbering across the wood floors distracts me from my surfing, and I look up to find Janeilia crossing the dining room towards the two-top table near the bar where I'm seated. Dressed in a too-tight black dress that puts her cleavage on full display and gaudy black stilettos with a red platform heel, this woman is an older, fuller version of the girl I used to know, and I'm immediately struck at the lack of positive emotion I feel at seeing her again. I'm hit even harder when I realize she's got seduction on her mind. This is going to be a long, awkward afternoon.

"*Dios mio*, Mateo! I almost didn't recognize you," she exclaims when she finally reaches the table. She wears an expectant look as she stands waiting for my greeting. I say hello but keep my seat and gesture for her to sit across from me.

She tries to play off her hurt and surprise at my unenthusiastic demeanor and lack of warm response with little success, settling instead on a look that brings challenge.

"What? No hug for an old love?"

She takes her chair, taking care to make a great show at getting comfortable as she settles into her posed stance. I'm guessing she's going for alluring but what comes to my mind is a lot closer to sleazy and classless. As the scent of some cologne she's applied with too much enthusiasm offends my nose and summons nausea, I struggle to hide my strong, negative reaction as I manage a tight smile at her suggestion.

"It wouldn't be appropriate, Janeilia. Would you like something to drink before we get started?"

I wonder if my voice sounds as clipped and impatient to her ears as it does to mine as she flings her long, blonde hair, much blonder and longer now than it was a decade ago, over a shoulder and foists her cleavage forward as she makes a show of studying the drinks menu. When the bartender reaches us, she selects a glass of red wine, and I order a cup of coffee.

"Nothing stronger for you?" she asks.

"No, I have plans later."

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She nods and studies me for longer than makes me comfortable. She eventually gives me a flirty smile and nods approvingly.

“Damn, you look good, Teo,” she says, eyeing me in that way skanky women do when a fuck is yours for the taking. “You should have let your hair grow like that when we were together. I would have loved to get my fingers tangled all in that.”

She waves a hand toward me as embellishment, and together her words and gesture disgust me.

“Janeilia,” I snap and lean in closer to keep our conversation private, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t come here to play catch up with you. This isn’t a social outing. And please, don’t call me that.”

She frowns, clearly put off that I’m not responding to her flirtations. “I just thought we should spend some time filling in the last 10 years, but—”

“Look, you say my uncle put you in touch with me. Explain why.”

She looks at me from beneath her lashes and gives a teasing smile.

“He helped me and my son to get here so you and I could talk things through. In return, I may have offered him my thanks, given him some incentive to help me reach you. I have my ways.” She lets that suggestion linger as she awaits my reply. When I give her none, she scurries on. “Anyway, what does it matter? I needed to reach you. He was the only one who’d help me.”

I give a curt nod and inwardly curse my uncle.

“Then I’ll be dealing with him. I don’t know what you thought was going to happen today or what you think is going to change, but I only have so much time and,” I break off for a moment before shaking my head slightly, “patience. It’s time to get down to business and get back to our lives.”

She scowls at my words and flips her hair with defiance.

“So that’s how it is? You can’t be bothered with me? You better than where you came from now?”

I laugh at her last statement.

“Cut the crap, Janeilia. You’re not my responsibility! All you care about, all you’ve ever cared about, is what others can do for

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you. You don't give a shit about me or anything that doesn't benefit you. So, either tell me why you needed to see me, or I can leave now."

She pouts, like an actual, honest-to-God pout, and I feel like I'm being punked. Either that, or I'm trapped inside a film noir and cast opposite a B-list femme fatale. Despite the lunacy of this scene, I hold back any reaction, hoping my facial expression looks as bored as I feel while I wait for her to stop whatever pretense this is and get on with this increasingly insane meet-up.

I thank the bartender when he returns with our drinks and take a sip of my coffee. She sighs, and I half expect whatever words flow from her mouth to be some dramatic monologue about how misunderstood she is.

"You're still mad at me then." She settles back into the bench seat with a satisfied smirk. "I'd have thought after all these years you'd have accepted it."

"No," I correct her. "I'm not mad. But I know bullshit when I smell it."

My words are a direct hit, but she's a clever and dedicated operative, sworn to see her crusade through to the bitter end. She quickly blanks her face of the rainbow of emotions my words trigger and curls her lips into a flirty smile.

"Aren't you even a little curious about why I'm getting a divorce?"

I shake my head as realization settles around me.

"Why would I be?" I respond, trying to control the pity and frustration she inspires. She came to try and play me. Though it doesn't surprise me that she thinks she can control the narrative about her divorce, it does make me angry. She has to know that her words are as believable as an urban legend.

"So, please," I implore her, my voice bored and barely hiding my agitation now, "I need you to say what's so important, and I need to return to my day."

My words cause her inner insolent child to take over.

"Not until you hear why I'm getting divorced."

She takes a drink from her wine glass, taking time to swirl the liquid in her mouth before swallowing. I pick up my phone, half

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in boredom and partly to give myself something to channel my frustration into. She huffs and sits back in her seat, crossing her arms.

“What happened to you?! Where’s the sweet boy I used to know?”

“Janeilia, stop playing games,” I reply as I consider her, my jaw tight and twitching periodically with the anger and impatience I’m having to force into check. I let my hand linger by my phone as I return it to the table. It gives me a minute to regroup and ground myself.

“Why would I possibly need to hear why your marriage didn’t work? Have you heard from me in the past 10 years? Do I look like I want to be sitting here with you now?”

Her look sobers as she searches my face. I think she’s looking for signs of cracks or a bluff, but there are none. If she wants to play the coquette, then I’ll shut that shit down like a pimp with a cane and take a few swings of my own. This isn’t a skill I ever employ, of course, but it is a lesson my father loved to teach as he tried to apprentice me into his life. A waiter stops by for our orders. I decline and try to reign in my anger, and Janeilia orders a burger with fries. Once he leaves, she drags her eyes to the table, takes a deep breath and swallows hard, giving me a casual shrug.

“I need you to know what a mistake I made marrying Nico. I realized it soon after we were married.”

I frown deeply as I deconstruct her news.

“What’s that got to do with me?” I exhale a rough breath and swipe my hand down my face. “You wanna dance around with games and small talk, but I still haven’t heard what’s so important. Makes it hard for me not to think you’re trying to weave one of your fantastic lies.”

“I don’t lie, Mateo!” she bites back, her body language tight and defensive. “It’s just that what I have to ask you,” her voice drops off and her eyes shift around nervously, “it isn’t easy. I just thought if we caught up a little bit on all that’s happened over the past few years, it might make things easier.”

“A few years?” I challenge, the amusement clear in my voice, “Ok. Ten to be exact. So yeah, time has passed. In that time, we

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grew and changed. We don't know each other any longer. So, you'll have to expect a certain amount of skepticism from me, especially when you still haven't said what you want from me."

"Oh, but I do know you, Mateo. Probably better than anybody ever will."

I give her a patronizing smile and shake my head.

"You probably think you do. And once upon a time that may have been right. But trust when I tell you that you have no idea what you're dealing with, Janeilia." I dial back my smile and narrow my gaze. "You don't want to underestimate me. In fact, I recommend strongly that you keep in mind who raised me and ask yourself how much longer you want to play your game."

I'm on the edge of anxiety as she sits there, making no move to speak.

"Janeilia," I hiss in warning.

"Alright," she snaps back, and a look of anticipation arrests her face. "Nico's divorcing me because he's not Jax's father." She sits and waits for my reaction.

"And like I told you when you suggested it on the phone, neither am I."

"Well, yes, you'd have to be."

"Nah. Not me," I dismiss her with certainty. "It's not very likely. Think about it. We were always safe. There was never a time I didn't use protection with you because a kid was the last thing I wanted."

I'm not looking to offend her, and hell, I really don't want to be *that* guy, you know, the one who freaks out when you tell him he's fathered your child. But as I consider this in the current dynamic, the idea of having made a child with this perverse soul sends me into legitimate, undisguisable fits of panic.

"Condoms and spermicides aren't foolproof," she answers, her tone dripping with defensiveness and sarcasm.

I lean forward and lock her in place with a cold, dead stare. "I'm not your son's father."

"But you might be. Probably are."

It's not lost on me that she's still hedging here. No thinking man could miss the obvious: if her husband isn't the father, and I

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may be the father, then who else is in this messed up mix? I'm not likely to get a straight answer but can't resist the lure of lobbing it out to see what sticks.

"Anyone else in the running for baby daddy?"

My words hit their target as intended as I watch her flinch in reaction.

"There's no need to be rude, Mateo."

For a moment, I think I see hurt in her eyes, but she recovers quickly, removing any hint of vulnerability.

"Just being real, Janeilia. You must know that I won't just take you at your word, though."

"It's not something I'd lie about!" she wails like a scolded teenager. "Especially not now." Her voice trails off as she fights to hold back tears. "You think I want to be sitting here with you begging you to believe me? As I said on the phone, I've got no choice. He's been battling a blood cancer for a few years now and needs bone marrow surgery. We can't do that for him until we find a suitable match. The doctor says a blood relative is our best option."

She dabs at the corners of her eyes, chasing tears I can't seem to find. I have no grounds to accuse her of lying, yet I'm in no way compelled to believe what she's telling me, at least not fully. Setting that aside for now, I probe further.

"I guess that's how Nico discovered the boy's not his? Through type matching or something like that?"

"Yes," she says, her voice scarcely above a whisper now.

The waiter returns with her meal and soon leaves. While she digs in, I consider the best path forward.

"I'm very sorry your son's sick," I begin, choosing my next words carefully. They need to be said, but they don't need to sound unnecessarily cruel. "But you have to know that even if there is an outside chance that I fathered your son, I may not be a match either, assuming that's your motivation in bringing this news my way now."

"Of course, that's my motivation! I'm sorry if the facts aren't what you want to hear, Mateo, but as the man I believe to be his father, you're the one hope he needs to give him a fighting chance.

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He's innocent in all of this, and he deserves at least a chance. So, will you help us?"

"Hold on. One thing at a time. Let's eliminate me as his father first. If I'm not a blood relative, I'm not a likely match either."

Her eyes brighten just slightly, and she abandons her food. She grabs her purse and digs around inside for something. She eventually produces a card and hands it to me.

"Here, I already have a lab. I set up an appointment for testing—"

I hold up a hand in protest, signaling my refusal to accept her pre-approved facility.

"You'll understand if I prefer to select a lab on my own."

She removes the card from the table and eyes me with malice.

"Why? Don't you trust me? Or is this your way of punishing me for marrying your brother? Have you ever considered my side of the story?"

"No, I don't trust you. But nothing from the past matters now. It hasn't for years, Janeilia."

I'm frustrated and relieved with this line of questioning, which not only puts to rest any demons that I may have thought continued to linger, but also, hopefully, heads her off from trying to derail the issue at hand.

"And in case you need to hear it, I'm not trying to punish you and never wanted to. I think maybe it was divine intervention when you married Nico. Everything turned out as it should have. I'm convinced of that. Have been for years."

"Damn, Teo, that's cold."

"No, Janeilia, that's facts, and I won't tell you again. You don't get to call me that."

But she ignores me, triggered by my honesty.

"You can sit there and say these things to me like we never meant anything to each other? Like you're somehow better than me when we're cut from the same cloth. From the same place. Raised the same way."

"Believe what you need, but sharing a common background doesn't make us the same, does it? You wanna sit there and play once upon a time, then be my guest. But write me out of the script."

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I have a life I love, one I've worked hard for. I won't be bullied, threatened, guilted, or cheated by you or anyone else. If by some miracle I fathered your child, you can trust that I always take responsibility for my actions. If I'm a blood match for the boy, I'll learn about how and whether I'm able to help him. So, my bottom line is this: we do this on my terms or not at all."

She points at me with one hand and smacks her palm on the table with the other. This is classic Janeilia, smug and determined.

"Fine. We can do it on your terms. But I won't let you overlook the big picture. Tell me what happens when the test comes back and says that we made a son together? What will that mean for us?"

She sits back in her chair, arms folded as though she's thrown down some dare. I shake my head just like I'm shaking off that notion.

"Like I said, that's not likely. There is no us and there won't be. Lots of people co-parent without being in a relationship. If what you really want is money, then we'll get lawyers involved."

She looks surprised, and for the first time since she sat down, I'm struck that she really doesn't get that I have nothing left for her. Like any man, I can admire her beauty, and I note that many have since she arrived. But in these past moments, the monster beneath the alluring outer shell has outshone the exterior finish. Maybe it's always been this way, and I was just too blind and in love to notice. What I do know is that compared with Alexa, there's no contest. Alexa radiates beauty, love, and compassion. She fills me with her warmth and makes me want to be better. No woman before her has ever inspired this depth of feeling. I don't need to tell Janeilia these things. But I do need to make her see that there's nothing left to cling to.

A sadness washes over her, evident not only on her face, but also in her posture. She reaches across the table to grasp one of my hands, but I pull it away before she can connect. She curls her hand into a fist and shakes her head in disbelief.

"You loved me once." Her voice is low, almost a growl, which I note.

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“We were kids then, Janeilia. And looking back, I think I loved the idea of you.”

“How can you say that? You won’t even open up to me now. You can’t know what we might be.”

“I don’t have any reason to try and find out,” I answer and frown at the downward spiral our conversation has taken and push to get us back on track. “I gave you my heart once. And that went how it went. I’m sorry your marriage didn’t work, but that’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Is it because I’m married? What if I wasn’t?”

“First off, that’s an insane question. But if you must know, I have someone in my life. I’ve moved on. And I’m not going to let you or anyone disrupt that. Getting back on topic, I thought this was about your son. His sickness? You should focus on that, and I’ll get back to you once I’ve chosen a lab for the blood work.”

My tone is dismissive, and if I stay here any longer, this is likely to devolve even more. I motion to the waiter for the bill.

“Do you love her?”

Her question catches me by surprise, almost as much as my simple, immediate reply. “Yes,” I say simply, and she flinches. I need to be shed of her and take time to process what she’s claiming. I dig into my back pocket for my wallet just as Mariana approaches with my care package in hand.

“*Está tudo bem, pequenino?*” she asks, wanting to know if everything’s ok.

“*Lindo, maravilhoso,*” I mutter, my voice thick with sarcasm. She gets my meaning, understanding that things are anything but marvelous at the moment. She shoots me a sympathetic smile, eyes Janeilia with cool indifference, and hands me the clam shell packaged dessert for later, waving off my credit card when I offer it.

“It’s on me,” she explains with a look that brooks no argument.

“Not necessary, but thank you, Mari.”

She waves me off again and leaves as I prepare to do the same.

“Feel free to stay and finish your lunch, but I’m leaving now.”

“Just like that?” Janeilia asks. “And who was that woman? You seem to know each other.”

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“She’s the owner and a friend. And I told you. I have plans and need to leave. I’ll be in touch.”

I push away from the table and leave before she has the chance to delay me any further.

Act Five: Truth in the Light of Day

A Moment with Truth

When I take my place beside you, when you finally hear my whispers within your heart, it's like a chance meeting with an ex-love. Your heart recognizes all the things you should have said but didn't, good and bad, as you replay the litany of things you'd do differently if given a do-over. It's not the chance meeting that makes me antsy, though. It's what happens next.

Contrary to popular belief, I hold no sway over Consequences. We may travel in the same circles, but we follow very different orbits and serve separate purposes. Unfortunately, most of those who dabble with Consequences don't have good things to say about the experience. And because they can't seem to separate enlightenment from any embarrassment, loss, or discomfort that follows once they've gotten to know me, I become guilty by association.

This has been a sore spot with me for some time now. Fear of standing in truth tends to make people run from me, yes, but it's what comes next – whether it's loss, punishment, ridicule, or worse – that makes folks try to outrun me, especially now with

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miscues and outright lies so in vogue. More and more, just as things are about to get serious, someone breaks left and adopts an alternate ending instead of standing by me. They move on to something that looks better, less threatening, not quite so life changing. It's usually not, however, because Consequences has a way of getting what she wants.

So, as our story continues, we find Alexa and Mateo entering a swirl of activity amidst dramatic life changes. As they test drive this new relationship, they'll see the world and themselves through new eyes. I thought I'd spend a little more time with them, together and apart, just to help button things up a bit, you know, keep things tidy between them. I hope they heard me. To be honest, though, I'm not sure. There's no feeling that quite matches new love, and they're caught up in their bliss at the moment. They'll want to stay inside their love shack a while longer, and who could blame them. But they need to come out and play the long game, too. They need to stay solid. They need to remember the things that drew them to each other in the first place. Honesty. Vulnerability. A no-bullshit policy. It can be easy to take all that for granted during the honeymoon phase. It's even harder to pay attention when the other pieces of your life decide to fall out of phase as if on cue. This is when the little things count. It's also when debris from little things left unsaid takes root, leaving the very thing you want to protect the most vulnerable. From what I can tell, though, my subtle urgings might not be enough. Alexa and Mateo appear to be experiential learners.

Chapter 24

Alexa

“We have done nothing,” Sydell addresses the room from her seat to Sam’s right, “to stop this ridiculous wave of accusations being thrown at Hedge.” She eyes me as if I am all seven deadly sins combined. “Being quiet doesn’t help our client, and so today, I think we’ve reached a critical decision point: Is our new managing director so hell-bent on seeing Hedge go down that her judgment is clouded? Are we abandoning our commitment to zealously represent each client so we can placate Alexa’s personal preferences? If so, then we must seriously reconsider whether she’s fit for this role, even if it’s on an interim basis.”

I expect I dash some of the satisfaction she’d hoped to feel when she pins her stare on me and finds me smirking, not scowling at or surprised by her accusations. At least, this is what I choose to believe when I observe the quick flash of disappointment spiked with horror that covers her face at my lack of reaction. Satisfied, I begin my rebuttal.

“This is a PR and image consultancy, Sydell. I’m all for zealous representation, but I’m not going to seed some false narrative. And the rest of you should consider carefully the wisdom in continuing to rep HedgeCo after considering what I’m about to

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share with you. Take the next few moments to hear me out. If you still disagree and believe you have a better plan of action to support Hedge, then I happily offer to stand down from my acting role, effective immediately.”

I scan the faces around the table and find the usual mix of boredom, challenge, and disdain mostly. This supercharges my next move.

“It’s not my job to like the man, but it is my job to protect the firm’s interests using the best information and resources at my disposal. Hedge is one client, and he pays us well. But is that revenue worth your reputation?” Sydell tries to interrupt, but I hold up a hand to stay her tongue, talking over her annoying, affected accent.

“Before you answer that, consider a few things. Hedge was convicted of second-degree rape when he was in college at the University of Texas at Austin. His family’s money helped him avoid prison, getting him off the hook with just six years of probation. Because it happened prior to mandatory sex offender reporting, he was never required to enter the registry and has avoided being tagged in this way.”

“And just how did he manage that?” Jackson Liddle sneers, playing his role as Sydell’s sycophant to a tee.

“His daddy and the judge were college roommates,” I answer, my voice flat and dispassionate. Then, simply because I can, I stir the pot for good measure. “It seems Hedge’s case was cited as precedent by the judge who sentenced Dustin LeChert, former captain of the Texas Tech lacrosse team, to just six months in prison following his rape conviction. And you may not have noticed, Jackson, but I have impeccable, unimpeachable sources.”

“Still,” Sydell interjects, “none of that has anything to do with the present. And as long as there’s no police investigation—”

“Oh, but there is, Sydell. Austin PD launched an investigation yesterday.”

“And no one knows about this why exactly?” Dick Storey asks.

“The department’s keeping it quiet for now. But trust, Dick, it’s not a new inquiry. It’s been reopened. Until now, they simply haven’t had any physical evidence to support claims and

suspicious, and Hedge has thrown around huge sums to make investigators and judges keep his confidence.”

“Physical evidence? Like what? And how do you know this is true?” Dick presses.

“Hedge allegedly likes to record his encounters on video. I’m hearing that two of these recordings have been turned over to the department anonymously. And I won’t reveal my sources. But I can assure you that I’ve confirmed this information using a couple of different channels. It all checks out, but more important, I wouldn’t share this with you if I wasn’t certain.”

Silence blankets the room as I wait for reaction. Hearing none, I make my final point.

“We’ve issued a statement. I’ve gone on record countless times, but you can’t spin the truth away without seriously quashing your credibility. A lie doesn’t become the truth if it’s told often enough. It’s irresponsible and reprehensible to press a line of messaging that you know isn’t true just because you don’t want the actual truth revealed. This is why I’ve resisted making some grand gesture through a press conference or other staged intervention that could help to change the subject. What you may not know is that I’ve spoken with Hedge a few times since last Sunday’s article hit. Each time, he’s refused to accept my counsel to reiterate his commitment to his business, his energy aspirations, anything that, on its own merits, might redirect the focus from him and back to his businesses. Hopefully, you will have seen the statement that I released to media covering these ideas, but at this point, he needs to go on the record with something. If any of you believes you have a better solution, I happily stand down. If not, I’d welcome your support from this point on.”

After a beat, Sydell and Jackson slow clap, their intent to mock me, though no one joins in their obvious derision.

“That’s enough, Sydell. Don’t be a child,” Dick scolds, much to Sydell’s disdain. He turns his attention on me. “I can appreciate your position, Alexa. But you’re new to this still, and I’m not certain that your ideas and instincts ultimately support our profit motive. Quite frankly, we don’t function if we don’t make money. And if Hedge fires us, we stand to lose quite a bit of profit.”

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“Towards that end,” says Wesley Caufield, the firm’s lawyer, “I would wonder, Alexa, if there is an intermediate solution here. Hedge has threatened to fire us, and though I’d never condone our promoting lies to protect his position, perhaps we could blur the picture just enough to give him cover and protect this account.”

His comments surprise me at first. As general counsel, he’s on point to protect the firm from legal exposure. But as one of its top executives, my brain quickly concedes, he also has a fiduciary responsibility to protect the firm’s bottom line.

“Perhaps,” Sam offers, speaking for the first time this afternoon, “we go on record with the messages you’ve suggested to Hedge, Alexa. Maybe you stage a presser from his corporate headquarters in the next day or so? Do a little something just to move the story away from these allegations.”

I consider this for a moment. This is likely what he came to discuss earlier in my office, this need to weigh profit alongside truth. I could do as Sam suggests. But in my heart and head it plays all wrong. It strikes me that although this is a plausible tack, it’s not one that I can initiate with comfort. When I consider the damning reporting that Sage has done and the aftermath of any subsequent stories that may go to print, I’ve clearly reached a key decision point. That doesn’t make it wrong. But it is wrong for me. So, instead, I vote my conscience.

“Based on my research, that feels like a risk you may not want to take. But I’ve said my piece and won’t try to talk you out of moving forward,” I reply.

Sam’s responding smile, dripping with a mix of indulgence and triumph, feels patronizing, but I won’t react to those feelings, opting instead to hang back to see how the next few moments play.

“So, then it’s settled,” Sydell chimes in, baring a contemptuous smile. “Alexa will do her job and represent this firm and our client more responsively and enthusiastically from this point forward.”

“Let’s be clear, Sydell,” I reply, my tone even and calm. “I won’t discourage the group’s decision, but I won’t be raising my voice to execute it either.”

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I revel in the confusion my words inspire.

“In light of this decision,” I press on with full conviction, “I’ll be amending my statement from the top of this meeting. In addition to stepping down from my role as acting managing director, I resign from Storey|Fischer|Stone, effective immediately. Thank you all for an interesting few months. I wish you the best.”

Sydell scoffs. “That’s certainly mature, Alexa. You don’t get your way, so you take your ball and go home? What about your commitment to this firm? To your colleagues? It’s such a bad look for you to leave like this.”

“No, what’s a bad look, Sydell, is asking someone to perform a role that violates their moral compass, risks their professional reputation and, I believe, that of the firm. Think what you will, but I’m not abandoning my responsibility here. I just can’t be complicit in confusing an already shady situation.”

I pass my gaze around the room, which only serves to harden my stance as I find that same mix of boredom and disbelief from before.

“I understand the importance of the bottom line. But looking only to the dollars can bring grave consequences. Look at Boeing. Their focus on market competition and profit motive superseded most everything else and led to hundreds of preventable deaths. But for the Covid pandemic, I’d be willing to bet that they’d be battling back from bankruptcy now. But now that being said, it’s not my place to talk you out of anything. I have to do what’s right for me, however, and this crosses a personal line of integrity. Now if you’ll excuse me, I thank you for the opportunity, and I wish you all success.”

I ignore the buzz of murmurs that fills the room as I push back from the conference table and turn on my heel, enjoying the heady adrenaline pump and euphoria of being in this moment. Rather than heading back to my office, I decide to send for my belongings and head straight for the exit. I send a brief text to Mateo catching him up on the happenings. His reply is quick, and we agree to talk more at my house this evening. I’m not sure what comes next, but I know I feel lighter and more carefree than I have in months. If

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I can train my focus on what's ahead and away from the past, especially these messy recent days, I'll be fine.



I can't remember the last time I was home this early, and apparently, neither can my children.

"What are you doing here?" Tristan asks as I enter the kitchen around 3:45. "You get fired or something?" He smiles thinking he's being cheeky, and I can't wait to call his bluff.

"Or something," I say blandly, letting my answer hang in the air as I move to drop my purse in my adjoining office, curious to see just how long my guys will allow me to get away with evasion.

I have my answer as Trace steps into my path, narrowing his eyes and pointing a finger at me. "Oh no, woman. There's something you're not telling us. Care to share?"

I smile and feign ignorance. "Well, let's see. I live here, so I was bound to come back at some point."

"Oh, but I say, and I say it again," Tristan says, "you're never here this early. Is something wrong?"

Despite his making light of the situation, I key in on the concern in his face and decide to drop my game.

"Nothing's wrong, boys. But I did resign this afternoon."

"No, seriously, mom, what's up?" Trace counters.

"I just told you, Trace. I resigned. Come sit and let me explain."

I take the next little bit to recount the events of the day and watch their faces skitter from intrigue to disbelief as they process this information.

"So, that means you don't have a job now?" Tristan observes.

"Not at the moment, no," I answer.

"So, how will you pay bills? Will we need to move?" Trace asks, his voice full of nerves and angst.

"Not at all," I say, amused and heartened by his train of thought. "I never needed that job to meet our financial obligations. What's more," I offer, pausing to ensure they pay close attention to my next words, "I would never have quit the

way that I did if our lives depended on that income. Rest assured, we don't need it. And I don't need the stress it brought."

"What's next for you, mom?" Tristan asks, his demeanor shifting from concern to curiosity.

"I'm not sure. But I'll figure something out. And you two won't worry."

"And you're fine with this? What about Uncle Sam? Wasn't he the one who roped you into taking the job in the first place?"

I fight hard not to cringe at the mention of Sam's name. "Uncle" Sam, like it or not, has been a constant in my boys' lives though they held no clue as to his true place on their family tree. It occurs to me that I'll need to consider that closely in the coming days and weeks and decide how and whether to move that storyline forward. *One obstacle at a time*, my mind implores, and I promptly and conveniently set that aside. I reassure the boys that Sam knows and will need to accept that this is my decision to make because working with him simply doesn't fit into my life. Seeking to deflect, and wanting to take advantage of their rapt attention, I pivot to the topic of Mateo's arrival later this evening.

"So, this is serious, then?" Tristan asks.

I smile and consider the boy. His face is earnest, and it's clear he's deeply invested in my answer.

"Yeah, Tris, it is. But only because he understands that you and your brothers always are my priority."

"He's cool enough," Trace interjects. "As long as he's good to you and respects you mom," he shrugs, "it's whatever."

After reminding them to be on their best behavior, I retreat to my bedroom for a shower, a much-needed break, and a glass of wine to savor as I process this roller coaster ride of a day and ponder the amusements yet to come as I step into life aimless for the first time in years but at peace.

Mateo

Shortly after I arrive at Alexa's for the evening, her sons scatter to tend to their various pursuits. It's unseasonably warm tonight, so we agree to have dinner outside in her garden.

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Though I'm happy to be alone with her, I dread the discussion we need to have about my lunch with Janeilia. The words I need to say seem to cue themselves up at certain points without regard for whether I'm ready to press play, keeping me on edge and fortifying my dread. Throughout our meal, we stick to inconsequential highlights from our respective days, both of us talking around the explosive events threatening to bring drama into our carefully scripted lives.

I can either sit here and struggle through small talk or I can just jump in. Without much preamble, I decide to jump in, running down key details regarding Janeilia's claims, making sure I allow my disbelief to color my words and tone of voice, anything to make Alexa know how absurd I think this is. I can't quite gauge what she's thinking, and it's tough to control my panic when she remains quiet for what seems like an age once I finish.

"Can you tell me what's really bothering you, Mateo?" She looks uncomfortable as she cherry picks her words. "You knew about her claims before you agreed to meet with her. So, what's really on your mind?"

My smile is as weak as I am unsure of all this. I mark how carefully she poses her question, so I, too, tread with caution as I explain my unease at the fact that my uncle is responsible for Janeila's reappearance. There's also his obsession with Emery, but that's immaterial. In both cases, Antonio's involvement in this makes no sense. Then again, not much of what he decides to do these days does. I exhale heavily before trying to explain something I don't even understand.

"Let's be sure we're on the same page, Lexi. I couldn't care less about Janeilia. But what I'd like to understand is my Uncle Antonio's interest in bringing her back. Doesn't make sense."

"Any idea why your uncle is so invested in your life?" she asks.

"He's not. What he cares about is his bank account, his image, and control in that order."

She rises from her chair and walks over to inspect one of her flower beds, picking and pruning at a few leaves before returning her attention to me.

“How does meddling in your personal affairs help with any of those things?”

“Antonio helped me find my way to the life I lead today, and I’ll always be grateful for that. But over the years, he’s become the sort of man who demands far more than what’s reasonable in return. The demands he tries to place on me serve his purposes only, and so most of the time, we just agree to disagree.”

I walk over to join her where she crouches, still busy with garden maintenance that until moments ago didn’t seem to be a priority. She frowns and shakes her head.

“That may be, but you don’t seem to type to let yourself be exploited for any reason and especially not by someone who supposedly cares for you. There’s more to this story. Has to be.”

Her voice sounds strained and distant, so I grab her hands with one of mine, stopping her in mid motion. I pull her up and onto the brick wall surrounding the suddenly offending shrubs and watch her eyes fill with questions, concerns, and something else, too. There’s a wariness there as if she suspects I’m holding back or hedging.

“Of course, there is, love. But for now, know this. I ignore it.”

Alexa’s smile is soft and sad as if I’ve just shared with her an untenable truth that could threaten my well-being.

“I may not know everything about you, Mateo, but I do know you tend to avoid conflict. So, I don’t think it’s healthy to continue ignoring his interference. Not if you want the answers you deserve.”

“Sounds like you’ve been talking to Beck,” I reply, a bit shocked and slightly amused that she hit the bullseye with her assessment. “Am I going to have to separate the two of you?”

“I haven’t spoken to Becket. Well, not since we saw him at Marisol’s. Why would you say that?”

“Nah. I was only kidding about the two of you talking. But Beck says I’m an avoider. Likes to give me shit about it.”

Her sympathetic smile guts me, filling me with shame and sadness.

“Maybe you should listen to him. You can’t know what game your uncle is playing unless you ask him. Confront him. I know

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you think ignoring him will make him go away. But staying silent may actually be having the opposite effect.”

I smile and shake my head, as much to shake off this conversation as to clear my head of the discomfort and dismay I feel where Antonio’s concerned.

“Now I’ve gone and done it.”

“Done what exactly?”

“Found someone who beats my ass with reason even more effectively than Beck.”

“We do it because we love you.”

She gasps as soon as the words leave her mouth as if desperate to inhale them back into place. I feel an odd mix of surprise and low-key anger when her color blanches at her unintended admission. But neither of us will get the chance to discuss this awkward moment – at least not right now. A loud scuffle followed by the stampede of feet instead claims our attention.

“Give me back my Switch, dick head!” Tristan’s voice howls from someplace nearby, and the sound of insistent footfalls grows ever closer.

“Nah, brother! If you want it, come and claim it!” I hear Trace scream with mock menace in reply.

Alexa face palms, offers apologies, and asks me to meet her in her den once she’s handled the matter as she excuses herself in haste to intervene in the boys’ dispute, leaving me to sift through her words – all of them – as I try to figure my next move.

When I reach the den adjoining her bedroom, I fill my wine glass and sip slowly as I take in my surroundings and replay our conversation. Over the years, I’ve learned to pick my battles with Uncle Antonio with precision. But because everything with the man tends to devolve into battle, our relationship has grown distant and strained. I’ve resisted challenging him too vigorously out of love and respect for my mother. *And how’s that working for you, asshole?* I can chastise myself all day long, but no amount of self-reproach will fix the situation. Though it’s the opposite of how I’d choose to spend my Friday morning, I’ll need to pay the man a visit and put his insinuation in my life to rest for good.

KIMBERLY GREER

I feel sad and strangely bereft especially as Alexa's other words take their turn to play over and over in my head. It's early in our relationship, which might explain her flustered reaction to letting her heart take lead. But I can't help but wonder whether she holds lingering doubts about me and my level of commitment to her. I thought it would take her far longer to tell me what I've known for some time now, and it had been a game-time decision not to say it back. Admitting to myself that I've fallen in love with Alexa was 10 times harder than it will be to tell her my heart. So trust, when I do say those words, I want her to feel my heart and know that it and only it is trusting her with its truth.

The sound of Alexa's voice derails my thoughts as she gives Tristan and Treat hell for their game console shenanigans from a spot in the hallway just beyond these doors. As she conveys her disappointment and dismay at their behavior, it's hard to contain my laughter as the boys latch on to contrition, doing their level best to talk their way back into her good graces. Once their voices trail off, I turn my focus to the various trappings around this intriguing room.

You can learn a lot about a person by observing the spaces they occupy. My eyes scan the room, landing on the various reflections of Alexa's regal style and her grace. An open design decorated in neutral tones brought to life by bold pops of color, the massive space features cherry wood furniture complimented by bursts of red, orange, and gold in the art on her walls and the pillows on the sofa. A boldly colored painting of a striking woman with bronze skin and green eyes arrests my attention. She's dressed in an orange and gold robe and holds a mask over one eye. She leaves the other exposed as a burst of light appears to radiate from her heart.

The sound of quick footsteps approaching halts my snoop session as I turn in time to see Treat barreling into his mom's room. He startles when he sees me but quickly recovers.

"Oh, um, hi," he says quietly. "Have you seen my mom?"

I walk over to where he stands just inside the doorway and watch with interest as he sizes me up. His bright, golden-brown eyes, so much like his mother's, hold me in place for a moment.

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He's a mini version of Alexa down to his wavy dark brown curls and smooth golden skin with a bronze shimmer. Clearly studying me, he's bold with it but not rude, trying, it seems, to keep his face neutral. It's not exactly welcoming, but not completely shut off either. In the week I've known these boys, Treat has kept his distance, only chiming in here and there and even then, only when his brothers were on the scene. I kneel to bring myself closer to his line of sight.

"She wanted to make sure that you and your brothers were settling in for the evening, I believe. She can't be far."

"Oh. Ok," he says, but I'm not sure that information is really what he's after. He nods slowly and chews briefly on his lower lip. "So, can I ask you a question?"

I smile as warmly as I can and tell him to go ahead. I'm not prepared for what he asks next.

"Are you and my mom having a sleepover?"

I laugh, feeling a bit awkward because of his question but I answer, "No, son. Not tonight. I'm just hanging out here waiting for her."

He seems relieved at my answer. "Good because she says we can't have sleepovers on a weeknight."

"Ah. I wouldn't want to break her rules."

He nods but it seems that was just his opening shot. "No, she doesn't like it when we do that. It makes her sad, and I don't like it when she's sad. Are you going to make her sad?"

His question is a filet knife slicing at my gut. Obviously, he's more aware of his mother's pathos than I knew. I stand and say, "Maybe we should sit and talk?" I don't wait for his answer as I move towards the butterscotch leather sofa. He follows and takes a seat beside me. I take a deep breath.

"I think your mom is really special, Treat. She's funny, she's sweet, and I like being around her, so no, I won't ever hurt her on purpose."

I can see the tension in his shoulders release a little, so I guess he's satisfied with my answer. He looks away from me briefly before pressing on.

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“But you did before. How do I know you won’t leave her like my dad did?”

He casts his eyes downward as though he really didn’t mean to ask that. Or maybe he was afraid of what my answer might be. Either way, I move closer to the boy, pat him gently on the knee and lean over, resting my forearms on my legs.

“Can I let you in on a secret?” I ask.

He looks over to me, the question clear in his eyes.

“When I first met your mom, she said no every time I asked her to go out with me. It took me literally months to get her to say yes.”

“Yeah?” He brightens, now keenly vested in my confession.

I nod and return his smile. “Yeah. So, now that she’s said yes, I’m not going anywhere. As long as it’s ok with you and your brothers, of course.”

I can see there’s more on his mind, but for now, I guess he’s found the answers he needed. He studies me for a few moments more, an earnest look on his cherubic face. Had I not been paying close attention, I would have missed his quiet “thank you” before saying good night and running off the way he came.

“Hey there, slow your roll,” I hear Alexa say from the hallway as she intercepts him. The sound of muffled voices and contented giggles quickly trails off and upward as the two ascend the steps to the converted attic turned loft that Alexa dubbed the “cub’s hub.”

She re-enters her room minutes later, noticeably more relaxed than she’d been before handling her teens and ushering her youngest to the land of nod. She closes the door behind her, slumps against it, and shoots me a sheepish grin.

“Just another day in the life,” she says with a shrug. She pushes off the door, and I push to my feet and take a few long strides to where she stands before reaching for her hands.

“And you juggle it all so well,” I grin back at her. “I learned a lot while you were away.”

“Yeah?” she volleys back, her eyes bright with curiosity and challenge. “Like what?”

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I wave her off. “Nah, that can wait. It’s your turn at show and tell. I want to hear about your day first.”

I walk us over to the sofa and pour a glass of wine to settle her obviously hectic nerves. I think she considers protesting at first but accepts the glass after a beat, takes a few sips, and dives in.

“After we hung up, Sam was insistent that we have dinner tonight. Said he wanted to talk, but I told him I had plans.”

“How’d he take that?”

“Told me to change them. When I refused, things went downhill quick. If any good came of it, I let him know that I think he’s only now willing to talk because I forced his hand. I also told him that I don’t think he would ever have decided to open a discussion if I hadn’t walked through his bubble and popped it.”

The tense words squeeze from her throat, the sound thick and taut with suppressed emotion. She looks away, but I can still see the pain and confusion she’s trying to outrun.

“How do you feel about things now?”

She sighs but doesn’t answer at first. I wait her out as she sips from her glass, lost in her thoughts.

“He’s controlled our narrative my whole life. I’ve let him.”

The smile she gives me breaks my heart. It’s held in check by so much pain and fear, and I want to rip Samson Stone several new assholes for the emotional assault he’s perpetrated.

“I feel like I need to resolve this in my head and on my own terms first. Then, I can put it into whatever box it needs to be in. When I can do that, I can see him again.”

Given their history, it doesn’t surprise me to hear her say this. What concerns me is her surgical precision in dissecting emotions from the equation.

“Makes sense, love,” I prompt. “But what I want to know is how you feel about all of this.”

Surely, Sam can’t know the depth of her despair, and if so, does Alexa know just how much of a shit-ass human that makes him?

“No matter what he has to say, I don’t know how to make things right between us. Not that they ever really were, obviously. Right, I mean.” She shrugs and shakes her head. “I think it’s just too late. And that’s sad because I do love Sam. I really do.”

As her tears begin to fall, she sucks in a breath and presses her lips together.

“That sounds so stupid, you know? How could I—”

Her voice trails off and she glances at me through tear-soaked lashes. I can’t let her torture herself needlessly for wanting something so badly that she’d bought into a loosely constructed version of the truth. I drag her closer and lean in to kiss her temple. She drags in a shaky breath and rests her head on my shoulder.

“All I ever wanted was acknowledgement,” she offers, her mind jumping ahead in the conversation. “So, I lived inside his fantasy, always hoping that something would change. That one day he’d see things my way.”

She pulls herself to sitting and looks at me as her mind settles on something.

“He never will. I know that now. And that’s not ok.”

“No, it’s not,” I agree, “but I got you.”

I try to move her mind forward. “Leave that for now and get to the part where you quit.”

She smiles in appreciation for the pivot.

“After I got wind of what Sydell was planning, I did a little digging into the latest with Hedge. There’s a pending police investigation. I’m not sure if he knows that, but he refuses to come out of hiding and become a credible voice in the discussion. At this point, the firm is more concerned about losing Hedge as a client if it doesn’t fight for him.”

“Well, it is a consideration,” I suggest before quickly adding, “I’m not saying it’s the only one, but it’s a necessary evil that needs to be kept in tight focus.”

“Of course. But fact is, I have information that I couldn’t share with them. I know there’s enough information to indict him. Don’t know whether they will, but I leave that to the justice system. It’s not up to the whim of some PR engine that thinks it has a vested interest in the discussion.”

“Should you tell them this?”

She shakes her head no. “I told them as much as I could without betraying trust. Even at that, I probably said more than I

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should have. But it doesn't matter now. In the end, they chose profit over integrity – mine to be exact.”

“How's that?”

“Sam wanted me to stage a press conference at HedgeCo. That would make me the *de facto* face of this issue and that didn't work for me. And so, I quit.”

I nod, understanding better now what brought her to this decision. It's one I thought she should have made long ago, but I need to be certain she's in a good place with it.

“Do you regret it?”

“Not at all. I reached my end, and so I left. Just walked out of the meeting and never looked back. It was liberating, which feels good. But I don't know what's coming next, and that's got me edgy.”

I laugh. “Here we go with the control issues again.”

“Not really,” she answers defensively. “I just don't like feeling aimless, but I'll figure it out.”

I remove most of the space between us, scoop her up and pull her onto my lap.

“I know you will. And I'll be here to help in any way that I can.”

I kiss her knuckles and smirk when I hear the faint intake of breath as my touch catches her body off guard.

“In the meantime, care to tell me what you and the little one were collaborating over?” she asks.

“No collaboration. Just maybe a bit of commiserating. For instance, I learned that your boys are ferocious defenders of their mother.” I lean in to kiss her left cheek. “And that they're quite concerned about your emotional well-being because you're their entire world.” I nip her left ear with my teeth and smile when I feel her try to stifle her moan as I pull back to look into her eyes.

“All that? Anything else?”

I hum my assent and reply, “Hmm. Plenty. But I don't want to talk about that right now.”

What I want is to forget these problems and get lost in her, but this isn't the time or place for that, especially with her kids so nearby.

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t want to talk,” I answer, unable to stop myself from wanting to taste and drink her in.

I pull her up and walk her backward until I flatten her against the wall adjacent to her bedroom door. Once I’ve pinned her in place, I grab one of her hands and raise it over her head, effectively caging her in. When she loops her other arm around my waist and looks up at me, my mind goes hazy and my body strains towards hers as I skim my other hand along the outside of her right breast, past her waist and back up again, creating a maddening rhythm as I tease and arouse her.

A ragged moan escapes her lips as the intensity of our contact increases, her body writhing in response to my hand teasing her flesh. As my lips find the hollow of her collarbone, there’s a loud bashing sound from somewhere outside followed an instant later by the blaring of a car alarm. *My* car alarm. We pull apart in haste, and it’s an effort to adjust my pants and reset my sex-hazed mind. What we see when we get outside sobers us both, shocking us silent as we scramble to investigate.

Alexa

I’m strung tight, and my brain seems to have lost the capacity to function. The scene in front of my house is surreal, halting my steps as I process what’s happened.

As Mateo silences his car alarm, my boys come barreling outside to see about the commotion. I send them inside to call 911 as Mateo inspects his vandalized car. He remains remarkably calm as he surveys the broken glass, slashed tires, and badly scratched paint from this hit job. I screech at the sight, completely panicked now, but Mateo reels me in.

“Baby, it’s just a car.” He pulls me into him to calm and to soothe, but I’m not sure that’s possible.

“Who would do something like this?” I wail, my thoughts zipping through guesses about who would be crazy enough to do such a thing. “I can’t believe—”

“Shhh,” he coaxes, rubbing my back and pulling me closer to him. “Let’s just wait for the cops to get here. We’ll figure it out.”

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By the time the cops arrive some 10 minutes later, the scene has attracted a few curious neighbors eager to know what all the fuss is about. I wave them off without much explanation, ensuring them that all will be well. I've never been keen on allowing my neighbors too much insight into my life, and I don't intend to start being an open book now. So, after the police officers inspect Mateo's damaged vehicle, I invite them inside and away from inquiring minds.

As per their standard procedures, the police have done an initial check of the vehicle and ask us what I imagine is the standard battery of questions one is asked when such things take place. *Do you know anyone with a vendetta against either of you? Have you received threats prior to now? Could this be the work of a scorned ex?*

I consider my answers with care and caution. Just because Trent seems unhinged doesn't mean he is. Besides it seems Mateo is dealing with his share of crazy, too. So, in the most general terms, I share with police the fact that I've refused my ex-husband's requests to see me since his return a couple of weeks ago, and Mateo details his encounter with Janeilia from earlier today. The cops exchange a look but don't comment, instead scribbling notes as each of us offers general details about our prior relationships. After taking our statements, the police inspect the outside of my house for further signs of vandalism or trespass but find none. Having taken notice of the Nest camera at my front door, they ask to see the footage. I immediately feel silly for not having thought of this sooner and go to grab my phone. Unfortunately, the perpetrator is well disguised, wearing a ski mask and dark, unremarkable clothing. The officers reassure us that they'll continue looking into the matter, sharing plans to canvass the neighbors for any additional insights they might be able to share. Nearly an hour passes before a tow truck arrives to cart Mateo's Jag to the police station for more in-depth processing, fingerprinting, and investigation, and the police let us know they'll be in touch.

Once they pull off, I drop onto the front steps and plant my face in my hands. Mateo hurries to sit beside me and wraps an arm around my shoulders, his voice soothing and seeking to comfort.

“Hey, love,” he purrs, “don’t do that. We’ll figure it out.”

I look at him, incredulous that he can remain so calm.

“What the hell, Mateo? This is serious!”

“Of course, it is. And we’ll let the police do what they do. What I care about now is making sure that you and boys are ok. So, you can’t stay here tonight.”

“The hell we can’t!” I erupt with indignance. “I’m not going to let anyone run me from my home!”

“And I’m not going to risk having something happen to you guys, Lex!”

He reaches for my chin and places a soft kiss on my cheek before wiping away tears I didn’t know were falling.

“Don’t you know what you mean to me? If anything happened to you, it would devastate me. Behind the iron curtain that shields your eyes from most of the world, I feel the remnants of happiness that you’ve tucked away deep inside. You’ve been strong for so long because you’ve had to be. Now, I’m asking you to let me help you with that.

“I want your happiness and to know that I had a little something to do with making you feel that way because you’ve made me feel again. You make me laugh. You are the most exquisite, sexiest, most thoughtful, most intelligent woman I’ve ever known. And I love you, too, baby.”

I suck in a shaky breath, stunned, delighted, and numbed by both his timing and his words.

Mateo

I smile and pull away from her slowly, strangely grateful for the night’s odd turn of fortunes. I go to reach for her again because I apparently can’t stop myself from touching her. I drag her in to me, place a quick peck on her cheek and another, deeper kiss on her lips before we’re interrupted by a strange voice.

“Well, I guess all that noise was simply a false alarm.”

We pull apart to find a woman with blunt-cut, shoulder length blonde hair and a curious stare standing before us. Alexa hops to her feet, her stance defensive and if I’m not mistaken, hostile.

“You can go home, Malady. Everything’s fine now.”

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She walks closer to Alexa, a look of contempt and mischief on her face, so I stand and walk over to close the distance between Alexa and me.

“It’s far from fine if the police were called in.” The woman looks up to me with raised eyebrows. “I don’t know what type of company you’re keeping these days, but this used to be a safe neighborhood.”

“And it still is,” Alexa responds. “Now do go home, Malady. It’s late. And as you can clearly tell, there’s nothing for you to see here.”

The woman’s expression turns from contempt to interest as she scans me from head to toe.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Alexa.”

“Malady, is it?” I interject, bringing Alexa to stand behind me to shield her from this foul woman, “you seem to have a perfect view of the neighborhood from that perch you like to occupy in your window. Maybe you saw what happened here tonight?”

My words have no energy behind them but seem to do the trick as the woman’s face turns red and her lips press into a tight line. She shakes her head, narrows her eyes, and gives Alexa the stink eye before turning to stalk away. When she’s safely out of earshot, I turn to Alexa.

“Mind telling me what that was all about?”

That’s when I learn that her toxic neighbor was one of her ex-husband’s mistresses and that the woman remains fond of antagonizing her whenever she can.

“That would explain some things then,” I say as I watch shadows, fear, and sadness cloud my girl’s beautiful eyes. “Let’s get you inside.”

She nods wearily, “Yeah, I think I could use a little time to decompress. It’s been quite a day.”

“To put it mildly,” I reply. “Now go on. I’m sure Mrs. Kravitz is eagerly awaiting act two of our little show.”

I nudge her playfully as I explain the nickname I’d hung on the woman.

“Mrs. Kravitz?!”

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“Yeah, you know. Like that old busybody bat from *Bewitched*. Like you never watched Nick at Nite! But seriously, watch that one. Tonight’s not the first time I’ve spied her peeping, obviously. She’s always looking out her window when I come to see you.”

Alexa laughs heartily, nodding with enthusiasm at my accurate analogy of her brazen, ballsy neighbor.

“Dude, I was into *Bewitched* before you were a glimmer in your daddy’s eye! I wanted to *be* Samantha when I was little! But you’re spot on about Malady.”

“Is that really her name? Malady?”

“I know, right? Some stuff is just too good to make up.”

Once inside, I try but fail to convince Alexa to pack bags for herself and the boys and come home with me. When she flat refuses the offer for the final time, I let her know I won’t be leaving her alone, either, so we decide that I’ll stay here for the night. The boys are all about the intrigue of trying to figure out who busted up my car and frankly are more focused on that than on whether I’m having a “sleepover” with their mom. When she’s finally able to get them to settle down, we head back into her den, now exhausted from the flurry of emotions and activity.

“Not that I’m in a hurry to go bed,” I explain, “but I think it’s time we put you away for the evening.” I run my thumb over her lips, leaving her breath thready.

“You best put that look away as well,” I add.

“What look?”

“The one that’s asking me to do bad things to you,” I explain, a hint of a smile playing on my lips as I try desperately to wean myself from our sex-starved stand-off.

“I thought I’d make a few calls and let you get some rest.”

Before she can protest, I stand and head for the door.

“So, here’s a thought. What are your plans for the weekend?”

“Don’t have any, although Lindy is making noise about being in town and needing to meet you,” she answers and walks over to where I stand.

“Ah yes, the bestie seal of approval, then?”

“Exactly. But if you’re not up for that—”

MASKED INTENT

“Stop,” I say with a kiss to her nose. “It’s fine. We can work that into our plans, but I need you alone, and I need my hands on you at some point,” I explain, rubbing small circles into her lower back until I find that round, juicy ass, “just you and me so we can take the time we both need to escape.”

She shakes her head, her eyes sad and drawn. “Yeah, I could use some time away from drama. And about tonight. I am so, so sorry—”

“Stop it, Alexa,” I chastise her albeit gently. “Everything will be fine.”

She hums and buries her head in my chest. I feel my arousal growing after a moment and disentangle from our embrace. I drag her questioning eyes down to the evidence of my rising desire, and she giggles, nodding her understanding as we manage to reclaim some sense of calm and decorum so I can leave her room.

As fate would have it, of course, the boys are nowhere in sight once I reach her home office, but that didn’t necessarily mean they weren’t nearby or on watch. Though my libido is royally pissed, I grudgingly admit that it’s probably a good thing to keep things in check for the evening. My mind needs clear focus as I begin trying to figure out why our lives have suddenly become the targets of interest, intrigue, and intimidation.

Chapter 25

Friday, October 11
Mateo

By 7 in the morning, I feel like I've scaled the trickiest face of the world's steepest summit.

Despite my pleas for her to try to settle her mind and get some rest, Alexa must have paced nearly every square inch of space in this house during the night. We'd been hesitant to say what we'd both been thinking, but I needed to know whether her ex was capable of violent acts. I get my answer over coffee around 2 in the morning.

"Trent is many things, Mateo," she shares, her hands clasping her coffee cup with desperation, "but this is too messy for him." She sips from the mug and closes her eyes. She sighs as she returns the mug to the table. "But intimidation and blackmail? That I could see."

I wait while her statements click into place. "I see where you're heading, love. But why?"

"Why indeed! I have no idea." She rises from the table and takes the few steps to peer from the French doors that open to

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the kitchen's balcony. "But it's not like Hedge doesn't have motive. Hell, it might even be Sam."

I walk over to where she stands and wrap her in my arms. "Sounds like somebody needs some sleep."

As expected, she turns to protest, but I silence her with a kiss followed by a dose of calming logic.

"You're a step away from victim blaming, and I won't let you do that to yourself. You didn't do anything to make some maniac decide to trespass and destroy property. I'm not telling you not to think about it. But I am asking you to step away and clear your mind of all this."

She tries to debate the terms of disengagement until we're both exhausted, entertained, but spent from battling each other's mulishness. When she finally decides to take a quick nap, I let my own concerns guide my anxieties as I continue trying to decode Janeilia's true intent. Any mother in her situation would be desperate to save her son. When I replay our talk in my mind, which I've done to the point of exhaustion, I can't let loose of the idea that she was more interested in starting something with me than in finding treatment for the boy.

I scour my brain for memories of those last days with her before discovering her marriage to Nico. About a month or more before we were to marry, I'd let her convince me that we should abstain from sex until after the ceremony. She'd thought, she said, that it was traditional and romantic, and I wanted to give her everything she wanted. In hindsight, it's more likely that our abstinence freed her to be with whomever she wanted. Whatever her reasons, I'm even more convinced that I didn't father her child.

Sometime after 3:30 a.m., I called Beck to get his take on all this and to bitch about the situation. After cursing me out for disturbing his sleep, he seemed stunned that I wasn't angrier about my car or about Janeilia's resurrection in my life and what this turn of events, together and separately, might mean, but there's no need to waste that energy. I'm playing defense and have no time to waste on anger. Besides, much of that emotion has channeled itself into outrage at Alexa's situation with Sam Stone, a man I need to

know better. I'm hoping to create an opportunity to do just that later this afternoon when I'll bring the office moving team that I'll be pulling together to collect her belongings from the firm. If this goes according to plan, news of the moving activities will reach Sam Stone, Sam will come to me, and I'll take it from there. I realize I may not be able to sit down with him today, but he's going to know who I am and how he's affected Alexa at the very least. But first, I'll be paying a visit to dear Uncle Antonio.

Over coffee, I size up my girl's emotional state before filling her in on my plans for the day. When I give her the heads up about heading to Storey | Fischer to move her things, she looks at me in disbelief.

"What?" she asks, still staring at me.

"I'm hiring movers to pack and bring you your things from the office, love. We'll be there sometime after 3, so you should call ahead to let someone know to expect us."

"Wow, Mateo," she responds, "how'd you know I hadn't packed?"

"I figured when you said you'd left directly from your meeting. But we can talk about that later. Call the front desk, love."

"Ok, I'll call shortly," she answers with a laugh. "I think I like when you're bossy. I will so regret saying that at some point, I'm sure, but your telling me what to do kinda turns me on."

Her comment stirs thoughts I don't have time to indulge, making it a supreme struggle to keep my mind on the business at hand.

"Then, we'll need to explore what happens when I make you do what I say soon," I say, failing to keep the smile from my voice. "Right now, I have to run. I'll call you this afternoon."

Alexa says she's fine here alone, but I'm not so sure. I'm also not equipped to do anything about that as long as she continues to think of me as an add-on and not as a partner. As *her* partner. Yesterday was transformative in so many ways. Hearing Janeilia's news, feeling Alexa's pain, having my car vandalized, and finding deeper traction with her sons stirred a need in me. None of these things alone is remarkable. But together, they propel me to take

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steps to accelerate and protect the future I see so clearly and want so desperately.



After ensuring Alexa's doors and windows are secure, I call Bryan Vasquez and have him take me back to my condo to prepare for the busy day ahead. I leave a message with my uncle's secretary, alerting him to my planned arrival later this morning during his scheduled office hours. I then set about the task of getting dressed and solidifying plans with the office moving crew. Realizing I need my uncle to regard me through a different lens and knowing I'd be in the company of people who create story lines for a living, I put some thought into the optics of these visits and how they and I might be perceived.

It would be all too easy given the evidence of my Latin heritage to mistake me for part of the moving team, and I normally wouldn't care. But my baser instincts and general impressions tell me that in this case, I need to put some space between these guys and me as I try to find a way to chance a meeting with Sam Stone. I also need to distance myself from my uncle. Probably the worst thing I could have done is to have let him take advantage of my thankfulness to him and my devotion to my mother in his constant crusade for more. More power. More respect. More anything he could leverage for his personal gain. Today's courtesy call would make the Bank of Mateo insolvent to him from now on and reiterate my independence from his schemes. The conversation won't be casual, and neither will I. Though I don't prefer to wear suits, I keep several well-tailored designer styles in my wardrobe for the just in case. Today, I've created the illusion of careless, dangerous sophistication with the black Tom Ford suit I selected for this excursion. I left the tie at home, decided against shaving, and pulled most of my hair into a messy man bun, a style I almost never embrace and kinda hate. But it gets big notice from women and puts off men of a certain type – the very type I suspect Sam Stone to be and the type I know my uncle to be – and I'm guessing these visual props will come in handy at some point during these

visits. The overall effect is what might happen if the mystique of Sean Connery's James Bond and the badassery of Robert De Niro had a baby.

Once I'm ready for the day, I take a moment to sit on my balcony, collect my thoughts, and chart a game plan. Because I've always had a knack for deciphering people and their motivations, psychology was a natural choice for me when deciding which major to pursue in college. I wasn't sold on the idea of teaching, though, not at first anyway. That was Antonio's influence.

He and my mom had grown up in a poor but tight-knit family in the Dominican Republic. Antonio always resented their modest lifestyle and set out to live his life differently. Always brilliant and strategic, he worked hard in school and hustled every minute when he wasn't studying so he could earn and save and seed his dreams. As the story goes, Uncle was fiercely devoted to what mattered most: his sister, my mother, Isabella, and finding his way off the island and into a higher socioeconomic class. He also was kind and loyal and, for me, a role model. Only one of these things remains true today.

When I was granted my student visa, I came to the States believing my uncle to be my financial sponsor. I soon realized that this was true on paper only and that Ellison Stallings was, in fact, the actual benefactor. Stallings met my uncle while doing a semester exchange program at the University of Puerto Rico. It was my uncle's junior year at the college, and he met Stallings one night at the bar he tended in order to earn money for rent. Stallings was drawn to and fascinated by my uncle, I've been told, and the two immediately struck up what has become a lifelong association. Ellison gave my uncle his first shot at professorship. But over time, something happened to shift the balance of their relationship, making it less a meeting of the minds and more a call and response, featuring my uncle as the mockingbird in the equation. Whatever Ellison has accomplished or acquired, there's an unspoken but very much implied challenge to my uncle to try to match or surpass his outcomes. Never one to back down from challenge, my uncle signs up for whatever Stallings nominates and pursues, his loyalties fully shifted to his friend and away from

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family. But each time he takes up these challenges, he loses more of the person I once thought him to be as he sinks deeper into the man he hopes the world sees: the vain, devious, and unpredictable mastermind muscling his way towards his goals. What he doesn't get is fundamental: The Stallings family's pockets are deep – generationally deep – so no way could a struggling professor hope to find the resources to compete in the same ways made available to the man he counted among his closest associates.

I consider all of this and how it's always confounded me. When Antonio began pounding on me weeks back to help him put on a good show on the admin party circuit, I gave my mom a call. I'm fairly certain the answers I need about Antonio are tucked away among the shrouded secrets she keeps locked behind the attic door that protects her dark memories. Each time I've knocked, she's reinforced the locks. It might be time to take this up with her again. True, I owe him for the lifeline that he made possible. But it's time he stopped coming at me expecting the gratitude he's received 10 times over.

“Dr. Da Rocha, to what do I owe this most unexpected but long overdue visit?”

It's hard not to show my annoyance with the man. Antonio Da Rocha, dean of the school of psychology at American University, sits behind his desk, silently demanding my acknowledgement and a greeting befitting a man of his ego, er, stature.

“Uncle,” I manage without too much dread, my posture tight and anger barely reigned, “let's start by helping me understand your reasons for putting my brother's wife in touch with me.”

He sits behind his desk and gestures to one of the seats across from him but doesn't respond immediately. His expression impassive as he studies me closely, I recognize it as one of the handful of crimie tactics he likes to slip into from time to time. It's meant to intimidate but instead puts me on alert. I decide not to take that seat. Not yet anyway.

“You haven't been around much lately. I thought we talked about this. I need you more involved. And, you should know that Dr. Stallings has taken notice.”

KIMBERLY GREER

“And that has what to do with why you thought it was appropriate to put Janeilia in touch with me?”

There’s no way he doesn’t pick up on my sarcasm and agitation, though I barely try to mask it. This once-kind, once-solid man is the worst kind of menace these days, which is why I keep some distance between us. The problem with my passive-aggression is that it’s brought out the very worst in dear Uncle Antonio. His mischief shakes things up with Mxyzptkian precision, injecting next-dimension challenge and disadvantage into your life with meddlesome, self-dealing manipulation. I’ve let him know I’d prefer to support his career ambitions from afar and suspect he’s shown his thoughts on my absence from various social affairs by helping Janeilia contact me.

I’m certain he believes the sneer he sends my way passes for a smile.

“I thought hearing from your past might grab your attention because you seem to be lost right now. This is where your focus needs to be. You’ve lost sight of your priorities, my boy.”

Though he’ll tell me this social circuit is an important part of my path towards tenure, it’s not the right path for me. It’s the one that he’s chosen for me because it supports him in his quest to be seen. All that matters to him is becoming provost. That’s why he kisses the ass of the current provost, one Ellison Stallings, pledging his allegiance to every wish or whim the man can think to desire.

“The future I will have is here. Is it so much to ask you to help me out when I need you most? And need I remind you: Tenure’s no guarantee for you.”

I laugh as I make my way to one of the chairs at last.

“Threaten if you need to,” I say, waving off the threat and the man, “I’ll take my chances. Right now, it seems you need to be reminded to stop fucking around in my life. I don’t owe you shit. Not anymore.”

“Ah, now see. That’s where you’re wrong. Stallings has been a great benefactor of our family. I’ve made sure of that over the years.”

MASKED INTENT

“And you’ve remained loyal – to him above anyone else. Despite this, I’ve expressed my gratitude to you both for your generosity. You have a scholarship foundation set up in your name that’s brought lots of good press to this place. I show my support for you each year by endowing the damned thing, which has repaid that debt to Stallings a few times over. So, it’s time for change, Antonio. No more contributions. No more events. No more interference from you. That’s done.”

He’s unforgiving in his assessment of me, his eyes narrowed and lips drawn tight. “You do realize who Ellison Stallings is? That if you finally just gave Emery what she wanted we’d both be set? Nobody’s saying it has to be forever. Just long enough to secure what I’ve earned. What you do after that is your business.”

Until you come calling again.

I now know this dance we do really well. I make a point that challenges. He reminds me of all he’s done for me. Of all I owe him. I brace for what’s certain to come but not before letting him know that I see him clearly, that I have for years now.

I remember the swell of excitement and hope I felt when my citizenship application was approved. That’s when I first understood the depth of Antonio’s connivery. It had taken me months to understand why he’d been so angry and frustrated at me for deigning to take charge of my immigration status. Marriage – specifically marriage to Emery – offered one path to citizenship, of course, but I wasn’t in the market for a wife. I was even less willing to become a cliché. But Emery wanted me, and her daddy gives her everything she wants, so Antonio saw a chance to further ingratiate himself. That all changed when I received my green card because it shot to hell the plans he was setting up with his buddy Ellison.

Though they could no longer rely on the immigration argument to sway me towards marrying the girl, they remain on a mission to pair Emery and me “for our own sakes” they say, but I know better. Emery is a wild, aimless, and, largely, clueless mess, a spoiled, American rich girl without focus or intent. Her father wants her taken care of, and my uncle has him convinced that I’m the one to do it. Or, more on point, my bank account meets the

required threshold. He continues trying to leverage me to meet whatever perpetual obligation he must have inked with Stallings. He had no idea or refused to see that Stallings used him for sport, daring him to one feat or another simply because he could.

Antonio's voice shakes me back to the present and to my resolve to end this insanity.

"Unlike you, uncle, my life doesn't revolve around this place. I don't want it to. And I'm not interested in this little arranged marriage the two of you are trying to cook up. I mean, shit, man. Do you ever think of anything other than what's in it for you?"

"No, and neither should you," he sneers. "Then again, we don't all have trust funds to rely on. I can't just hop from passion to passion as you have. I like to think I had a little something to do with allowing you the space you needed to become the man you are today, to be able to live the life you choose to live."

I always hate when he reminds me of what we both know is true: he'll forever hold me in his debt, no matter how many feats of loyalty I complete in his name.

"Uncle, I'm grateful for all you've made possible," I jump in to redirect the messaging I've heard so many times before. "I'll always support you in your endeavors. But I'm done letting you hold it over my head. I've more than paid you back, and I won't be held hostage to your obsessions, commitments, or whatever you've promised Stallings this time."

"No?" he challenges, "Let me spell it out for you. I will be the next provost of this university. You can help me get there by removing certain obstacles from my path. By smoothing things with Stallings." He leans back in his chair, and his eyes darken with malice and warning. "If not, well, maybe this isn't the career for you."

"Maybe it's not," I concur, which throws him off a bit. This conversation will only deteriorate if I stay, so while he considers me and my intentions, I stand before either of us can escalate matters. I meet his glare with one of my own.

"Maybe I'll take a sabbatical. Figure some things out. In the meantime, leave me out of your conversations with Stallings. And leave my life the hell alone!"

MASKED INTENT

At about quarter past three, I enter Storey | Fischer's lobby with a four-man moving team I cobbled together with the help of a few of my drivers looking to make some extra money for the weekend. We approach the young receptionist seated in the lobby. Alexa said her name is Gigi, and I let her know who we are. Because she's a female of the species, and because I understand how to work my appeal, my smile and a small dose of charm get her on my side in no time as I let her know who I am and why we're here. She nods in acknowledgement and asks us to wait a moment so she can announce our arrival. Though I can't make out the details of the conversation, I can tell that Gigi is getting some resistance from the female voice on the other end.

"I told you earlier that someone would be here to collect her things. I don't see what the big deal is. Alexa has a right to clear her office. She had the decency to call ahead and let us know." Gigi says, looking up at me with interest. I flash an aloof smile to help my cause as she listens to whatever response she's receiving.

"Well, ok, but I don't agree. So, while you go and do that, I'm sending them back."

She hangs up the phone, apologizes for the delay and asks us to follow as she rises from her desk. I admire her for her moxie, on full display as we make our way through the guts of the place. We attract attention from several pairs of curious yet not wholly disapproving eyes. When we reach our destination, Gigi warns that I can probably expect a visit from one of the executives shortly. She says, too, that they may not be as accommodating as she's been. This is when I seize my chance to see Stone, offering to explain myself to him directly, and it's clear that my asking after the man catches her off guard. I thank her for her help and support, and she leaves to find Sam Stone.

Once she's gone, the team gets to work, and I take this opportunity to learn a bit more about my girl as I scope out her home away from home. Placed strategically throughout the office are various signposts and artifacts from her career. A photo with Gretchen McMillan, the two deep in discussion, which had to have been snapped during Alexa's stint at MSNBC as an assignment

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producer. Alexa and Sage at what appears to be some black-tie event. A younger version of Alexa, curly ponytail locked high on her head, interviewing former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair against the backdrop of the Thames River. I find the most powerful yet modestly framed of her images placed alongside books displayed on a built-in wall shelf. It's a black-and-white shot of her sons, laughing at something uncaptured by the camera's lens. It's candid and beautiful, showcasing Tristan, Trace and Treat enjoying some moment and each other. I'm telling the moving crew in Spanish to handle these with extra caring as Sam Stone enters the office, a slightly older man in close pursuit on his heels. As they take in our operation, the older man looks on disapprovingly.

"What is this?" he squawks, then turns his attention to me, "And who the hell are you?"

I meet his incredulous stare and let it linger there before speaking.

"I'm here on Ms. Winston's behalf."

I make eye contact with both men but stand on my intentionally bare-bones introduction for now. I want to watch them size me up. While contempt blankets the older gentleman's demeanor, Stone, having seen me once before, regards me with great interest. His golden-brown eyes, eyes so like Alexa's, are curious and hold a hint of amusement and smug arrogance. I close the distance between the older gentleman and me and extend a hand.

"My name is Mateo Da Rocha. I realize this visit is last minute, but I wanted to be certain that Lexi has her belongings as well as the closure she needs. You can understand that, I'm sure."

I wait for half a beat for him to accept my extended hand.

"Dick Storey," he responds brusquely as we exchange a firm shake. Though it was slight and likely indiscernible to the older man, Stone's flinch at my use of nickname for Alexa tells me I've struck something inside of him while piquing the man's interest.

Stone narrows his eyes. "Does Alexa know you're here, Mr. Da Rocha?"

"It's Dr. Da Rocha, and as I said, I'm here on her behalf."

MASKED INTENT

“Dr. Da Rocha,” Storey continues, “surely you can understand that this is highly unusual.” He regards me with reproach, which I meet with boredom and disinterest. “Had we known in advance that you were coming, we could have scheduled someone to meet you here and walk you through the process.”

“There’s no need for that really,” I counter. “I thought it would be easier for everyone if I handled this quickly, and that’s our plan. I’m only here for Lexi’s personal effects. I’ll see to it that any tech and firm-owned items remain in their proper places.”

I split a smile between the two men, who, in turn, look to each other as if to plot next steps. Storey turns to Stone, his face a solid wall of contempt.

“We need to grab her media contacts before she has a chance to pull them out from under us! You need to get her back in here, Stone.”

“Dick,” Stone responds, “she *is* every media connection this firm has leveraged since the day she joined us. You’re thinking you can grab an inside track to people like Vanucci and her producer friends at MSNBC. She wouldn’t have put their information into our system, and even if she did, they’re not likely to talk to anyone *but* Alexa without some careful vetting first. They know her. Their relationship is with *her*. You know this as well as I do. And we can’t change that, no matter how much we might want or need to.”

“Then do as I say and get her back here, Stone! I thought you said you’d be talking with her today, to get her to come to her senses. What happened to that?”

Stone looks at me. “Seems it’s too late for that. Unless Dr. Da Rocha has some knowledge that we don’t.”

He turns to me with expectation, but I keep my expression neutral.

“I’d never presume to think or speak on her behalf. But I can tell you that her decision appeared quite final when I saw her last evening.”

Storey huffs in frustration. “You need to fix this, Samson. Tell her whatever you need but get her back here.”

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He turns to me, offering a curt nod and says, “Dr. Da Rocha,” before stalking towards the exit. Once he’s gone, Stone ratchets up his assessment of me.

“May I have a moment of your time, Dr. Da Rocha?”

Bingo. But now comes the tricky part. I want to be the avenging angel, but I need to be careful where I tread. One thing I know about my girl is her need to be independent in thought, word, and deed. Whatever I do from here on out needs to remove obstacles to their reconciliation without forcing Sam to take an action that would likely be disingenuous or premature. So, I let him see my hesitation before giving him my reply.

“I should probably keep my focus here. Just to make sure that none of the firm’s property is unintentionally removed.”

He gives a tight smile in response.

“It’ll just take a few moments, I assure you. We really should talk, Dr. Da Rocha.”

His reply gets my attention and not in a good way. I don’t like the tone of his voice and frown but don’t respond at first. I’m not exactly being helpful, which seems to bring his frustration to the surface. It’s also a useful tool in helping me make better sense of the man, and that’s why I’m here in the first place. I eventually nod and let the movers know I’ll be gone for a few moments before telling Stone to lead the way. We reach his office moments later.

“Please have a seat,” he offers, pointing to a small, round conference table. I take a seat and wait for him to begin.

“So, we meet again,” he says, studying me, “Let’s start by your telling me who you are to Alexa. I’m not sure I caught that earlier.” His tone is clipped and impatient.

“I’m someone who wants to see her happy and whole,” I answer simply, enjoying his obvious discomfort at not being in control.

“Well, then, that makes two of us.”

His eyes are keen and sincere, but in no way am I on friendly ground. Like me, he’s looking for an angle to exploit, something to let him know who the hell I am so he can play it to his advantage. I won’t say more than I need to but heed the warning from a voice deep inside urging me to handle this thoughtfully.

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Stone crosses his hands on the table before him and leans forward a bit.

“I have to say that I was hoping to convince her to change her mind and stay with us. Or that in leaving, she was more making a point than actually resigning.”

I watch him debate with himself a moment before pressing on.

“Since you seem to be a constant in her life I’m guessing, I’m wondering if you might be just the person to get her to see reason.”

“If you truly know Alexa, Mr. Stone, then you’ll realize that once her mind is made up, you’re not likely to change it – especially when it comes to issues of integrity. And the idea that her resignation was symbolic or attention-seeking is just plain fantasy.”

I’m hoping he received that for the insult I intend it to be. Though his eyes register no emotion, his lips press into a thin line, and I see the pulse in his temple beating a bit more prominently than a few moments before.

“Is that why she couldn’t come clean out her office herself?” He doesn’t exactly grit out the words, but he’s struggling to hold onto patience.

“Not at all. I set things up so she wouldn’t have to. In fact, she hadn’t given it any real thought until I mentioned it.”

“Perhaps you were hasty in taking this step then,” he suggests, but I shut down that notion before he has any chance to give it legs.

“No, in fact, leaving was not a decision she came to lightly. We’ve talked about it on and off for the past few weeks.”

This catches Stone off guard, his brows lifting in surprise.

“Have you now?”

I shrug. “Not in great detail, but yes, the thought has come up a time or ten.”

“Then perhaps you’ll have some idea of what it would take to bring her back. She’s quite valuable to this firm—”

“Mr. Stone, forgive me for interrupting, but you say you want to see her happy. If that’s true, accept her decision to move on.”

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“I wouldn’t have gotten as far in life as I have if I took no for an answer.”

“That may well be, but given the extenuating circumstances, there could be longer term effects of pressing this issue with Alexa.”

“Not sure I follow your meaning, Dr. Da Rocha.”

“Let me put it to you another way, then. I don’t think there’s much that you could say that would change her mind about staying here. Instead, you may want to consider what role you might play in helping her find the peace of mind she’s needed for so long.”

“Dr. Da Rocha, your insight and claims betray a close relationship with Alexa. Or, am I being a presumptuous old man?”

I’m not sure if he’s patronizing me or trying to winnow his way into my brain and good graces for more information. Either way, I’m not going to lie.

“Mr. Stone, I love her with my whole soul. When she’s suffering, so am I. Her leaving yesterday? The best decision she’s made for herself in a long time if you ask me.”

“Is that so? Well, assuming you’re correct, what will she do now?”

“She’ll figure it out. And while she does, it might be nice if she could finally put to rest the things that plague her heart the most.”

I stand from the table and consider him for a moment. I won’t wait for the man’s reaction, but I’ve struck a nerve as intended, so it’s a good time to leave. I do need to let him know, though, that I see him fully. That I know exactly who he is.

“It’s the eyes,” I say with a small smile.

“Excuse me?”

“Your eyes,” I repeat. “They’re quite unique and striking. Just like hers. And Treat’s actually.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. Good day, Mr. Stone.”

Chapter 26

Alexa

“You will avoid me no longer, trick.”

Lindy’s voice cracks open my solace. Though I was expecting her, I’m in the middle of giving myself a facial and am surprised she’s here so early. I keep my eyes closed and hear her taking steps towards my comfortable seat at my dressing table as steam penetrates my pores and releases tension I didn’t even know I was carrying.

“Don’t you have classes to teach? Young minds to develop?” I counter lazily, not moving to engage with her just yet as I bask in self-indulgence.

“No. Ever heard of fall break?” When she yanks the plug from my steamer, I have a hard time controlling my dismay.

“We can no longer be friends,” I say, only half in gest. Though I love Lindy to death, there’s no putting her off when she wants something. Right now, she wants in my business.

“Beesh, you know you love me. Now spill, and quick. Why are you home in the middle of the day, and when am I meeting your man?”

I sigh and look at her reflection in my mirror.

“I quit and never if you don’t stop trying to force your way into my business before I’m ready to share.”

I wave her back and away from the table so I can grab a towel from the bathroom. When I return, she’s made herself at home on my bed, letting me know she’s working hard to push my buttons. My bed is a sacred space where no one except me lies unless invited.

“You’re certainly doing the most today.”

“Got to grab your attention some kinda way,” she says with a cheeky grin, which I don’t return. She notices and sobers for a moment, holding up her hands in surrender.

“I can’t get straight answers out of you lately, and it’s starting to gall. What’s up with you? And why won’t you tell me what I want to know?”

I wave her off and point her to my sofa. She laughs but, realizing I’m not playing about having her ass on my bed, she hops to her feet and pads over to my seating area. I follow her over and grab a seat in the adjacent chair.

“Forgive me for not reporting out, Lindy, but it’s been a hectic couple of days.”

Her eyes darken with worry and fear as I tell her about Mateo’s car being vandalized last night.

“Shit, girl, that’s serious. Ridiculous. But serious. What are the cops saying?”

“Not much yet,” I say.

She stares at me in disbelief. “Sweetie, who would do such a thing?”

I sigh and tell her what I need her to believe for now.

“No clue.” I let her see what I hope passes for conviction before leaving the subject to explain why I quit my job.

“And how do you feel about that?”

“Why does everybody need to know how I *feel*?” I ask, frustrated and needing to protect these hurts from the coming inquisition. “I *feel* like I should have done it a long time ago. Hell, I should never have taken the job. Leaving needed to happen, and I feel free. The end.”

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“It’s not,” she counters, “but I won’t pry for now.” She murmurs the words as she studies my face to discover what I won’t say to her. “But I thought Sam had your back as you worked to make changes there. What happened with that?”

Despite our closeness, I’ve never told Lindy that Sam is my biological father. She likely suspects it, but I prefer to strip this discussion of any personal complications and keep this to matters of business only.

“Let’s say that Sam is part of the problems that drag that place down. He built the firm from scratch, so of course he’s going to want to do all he can to preserve his legacy. But the world changes, and businesses need to do the same if they hope to survive over time. I don’t think he can bring himself to see or accept that just yet let alone embrace the changes that I tried to model. And I’m not here to be his wet nurse. So that’s a long-winded way of saying that I couldn’t care less what he wants or thinks. I needed to do what was best for me and my peace of mind. And quitting was what was best.”

“Sounds reasonable. But are you happy?”

I let her see the conviction of my feelings.

“Completely. And I’ll figure out what to do next when the time comes. For now, I’m just going to enjoy feeling liberated.”

“Sounds like we need to celebrate. Call your man and tell him it’s time he met with us. I’ll get Phaedra over here, and it’ll be a whole thing.”

“Will you stop it with that already? I’ll be sure to introduce you while you’re here. But the harder you push, the harder I’ll push back. Why? Because I can.”

She studies me. “You do know I’ve talked with him, right? I’m probably the bridge that connected the two of you when shit threatened to go sour a couple of weeks back. I don’t see what the big deal is about meeting him.”

“I remember. And he’ll be here later this evening. But I need you to know that no matter what you say, what Phaedra says, it’s not going to make one damned bit of difference in how I feel about him.”

“So, in other words, to hell with what we think?”

“Precisely,” I answer without hesitation. “His meeting the boys was a necessary step. The boys liking him was a crucial hurdle to leap if this thing is going to last. You and Phaedra? That’s just icing. Don’t get me wrong. Icing is great. But it’s just not vital for my daily living. So long as we’re clear on that, then plan on meeting him this evening.”

“Damn, you’ve got it bad,” she says, a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

I smile as I give her a thoughtful look. It’s the look we exchange when we’re sharing our deep-seeded truths, the one reserved only for her.

“He’s everything,” I say softly.

“You know, in a lifetime of being married to Trent, I never heard you say anything even remotely like that.”

“I know,” I answer simply. “Like I said to you and Phae a few weeks ago, I never felt anything like what I feel for Mateo. I can’t apologize for that anymore. But it all feels so fragile, like I need to take special care so things stay great between us.”

“No one’s asking you to apologize.”

She has more to say but is holding herself back. I shake my head because I refuse to entertain anyone’s doubts about my decisions.

“Please just say what you need to say. I don’t have to agree with it, but I sure as hell won’t walk around knowing that there’s some unspoken obstacle between us. I’ve had enough of that from the people in my life, so no more.”

“Ok,” she says, clearly taken aback at my tiny clapback. “I’m just wondering what’s made you so sure when just a couple of weeks ago you were thinking that things between you may have been a mistake.”

“Well, on that, my dear, you’ll just need to think and wonder. Wonder and think,” I say, quoting Dr. Seuss, a habit from our college days used by one or the other of us to signal the end of a discussion, the point at which we’d exhausted all of the possible permutations of an idea or the end of the other’s patience.

“Standing down,” she responds, not totally satisfied but totally convinced that I’m solid and convicted in my thinking.

Chapter 27

Mateo

I have an Uber drop me at Alexa's house just after 8 p.m. The police haven't come up with a whole lot of answers about why anyone would bash in my windshield, so I thought I'd keep a lower profile until we knew more. Not knowing for certain whether the vandal was targeting Alexa or me, I figure there's no need to bring more attention to our movements than necessary.

Trace greets me at the front door and points me to the garden where Alexa is entertaining her friends, but before joining them, I stop and take a seat in the family room where he's currently camped out alone to see if I can finally crack his resistance. I don't get the feeling that he wants to feel much of anything towards or about me. But we can't go on like this. We abide an awkward silence before he takes to channel surfing.

"Nothing good on?" I ask as I walk over to take a seat on the chair adjacent to the sofa.

He looks up at me then back to the television screen. "Nah. Guess not."

I lean forward to catch his eyes. "What's your pleasure? Sports? Cartoon Network? Comedy?"

He looks over to me and offers a small shrug. “Dunno. Whatever’s on, I guess. But not Cartoon Network. It kinda sucks now. Nick, too.”

I nod in agreement. “Facts, man. It blows that they got rid of good shows like *Billy and Mandy* and *Codename: Kids Next Door*. And have you seen *Avatar*? The original one, not Korra.”

His face lights up as if I just gave him a million dollars’ worth of video games.

“Dude, my friend Dylan says that’s why we should get Hulu.”

His face grows more thoughtful after a minute, more suspicious like an inspector who’s suddenly latched on to a clue. “I didn’t know they showed those cartoons outside the US. Didn’t you grow up in another country?”

I smile. “I did, and they do. Not all US cartoons are exported, of course, though let me assure you that *Spongebob* is translated into several different languages. I saw those shows thanks to my father. He wired our house for access to programming pretty much anywhere in the world. That’s how I first learned to speak English.”

“What? From watching American cartoons?”

I nod and give him a sheepish look. “Yep. In large part. It at least gave me the foundation I needed. I learned more formally when I was in high school.”

He considers this for a few moments and returns the remote to the coffee table in front of us.

“I think it would be cool to live somewhere other than the US. We think we know everything, that our ways are the best ways.”

“Well, Trace, compared with conditions in other parts of the world, things here offer a greater number of people much better options than they would have in their native lands.”

“True, but that’s not what I mean. When you think you’re the best, you don’t think that there’s anything else to learn. We should take a lesson or two from more mature countries. Our hubris has always been and will always be our downfall.”

I’m struck by this level of insight from a boy of Trace’s age. I want to know more.

“So, in a perfect world, where would you live?”

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He gives me a broad smile, nodding. “That’s easy. Any island nation, except maybe Haiti.”

“Why an island?”

“Are you kidding me? Why not an island? The weather’s perfect. The food’s amazing. The pace of life is slower. People simply don’t seem to be as focused on their hustle or how many bags they have, so they learn to value what really matters in life. But that’s just what I think.”

Trace’s depth of feeling, his insights, and his instincts captivate me. It would be all too easy to forget the fact that he’s 13. I think that’s what strikes me hardest about having this conversation with this child. I wonder what leads a boy of this age to have so profound a worldview, but I don’t have the chance to explore that as he changes the direction of our conversation.

“Can I ask you a question about your hair?”

I’m not sure where this is going, but I tell him to go ahead, curious to know what he’s after.

“How do I get mine to look like yours?”

“You’re saying you want to grow your hair?”

He looks embarrassed for a moment. “Well, yeah. But it’s so wavy that I think it’d look more like a ’fro and not like yours.”

“It wouldn’t,” I say, studying his thick, sandy brown hair, which currently flops into his forehead in messy bangs and boasts a swirl of waves from the crown of his head to just beneath the point on his neck where his hairline ends.

“My hair’s wavy, too. But I think I can help you.”

It occurs to me then that he could be working me, hoping to grab my advocacy and use it to his advantage to work his mother, which is why I quickly add, “Unless your mom says no. I would think you’d need to check in with her first just to be sure she’s on board.”

The curiosity on his face is comical.

“Why wouldn’t she be? I mean, she’s all up into you.”

I laugh and try to explain myself.

“That may be, Trace, but I’m not her child. I don’t want to contradict her because then she’ll be mad, and it could be a whole thing,” I say. “So, let’s approach this in a slightly different way:

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have you asked your mom if she has a problem with you growing your hair?"

He shakes his head. "No."

"Let's start there. We ask her together and go from there."

Not completely understanding or buying into my approach, he nods his head warily, and I raise my brows to ensure we're in agreement.

"Sure. Ok," he says after a moment.

"Great." I offer my fist for a pound, which he returns along with a mega smile that twists my insides and melts my heart. His attention soon is diverted by the distant, muffled sound of his brothers' voices. It's impossible to make out what they're saying, but it's clear that they're not expressing deep affection for one another. Trace shakes his head and heaves a weary sigh.

"I'd better go see what that's about before they kill each other. Thanks, man."

"Any time, Trace."

As he bounds off to see to his brothers, I take a few moments to appreciate the beauty and depth of this most excellent son. I knew that Trace was layers deep. I also know that I've only begun to peel beneath his surface. The idea excites me in a new, strange way, making me appreciate a completely different aspect of falling in love. Perhaps my budding affection for Alexa's children offers me a bonus view of some of the best parts of her. Or maybe it's just that they're all simply great in unique ways. Whatever the source of this unexpected swelling in my chest, I know beyond doubt that my life has been blessed in ways I never considered possible. I've lived most of my adult life free from emotional ties, so fatherhood never received much airtime in my mind. I admit with great reluctance that Janeilia's claim that I could have fathered a child with her plays some role in this awakening. It's not lost on me that while my feelings for Alexa's sons grow, I want no part of anything that might bind me to Janeilia, nothing that could taint my life with the stain of her presence. Yet, I would never abandon my responsibility as a father. Real talk, though, I question my capacity to love a child of hers, a child that would surely bear her marks and stains and insecurities, not to mention the hallmarks of

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having been influenced by my brother, who maintains no semblance of human kindness and decency. I won't allow any of this to spill onto Alexa and her children. Though I don't expect this to become reality, it would be irresponsible for me not to consider these worst-case scenarios. I push to my feet and go to find Alexa and her girlfriends, quashing these notions quite literally for the time being. I won't allow them to gather steam and create worry. But I won't be caught without a solid and impenetrable defense either.

Alexa

"You look a lot better than the last time I was here."

Phaedra eyes me with interest as I fight to keep my face neutral. I'm expecting some shit from these two tonight once Mateo arrives. The thought has me on edge more than I'd like, but I won't let her know this. I give her my Mona Lisa smile because I prefer her at a distance and well away from my feelings.

"Is that a compliment, Phae?"

I bring my wine glass to my lips and eye her from above the rim.

"Of course, ho," she replies, eyes full of mischief and anticipation. "Clearly, you got laid. It's in the sway of your hips. Something about you is looser, more chill, so spill. Was it worth all the build up?"

Because my smile's always on automatic when it comes to Mateo, I let it out to play. "I quit my job yesterday. It's probably just that."

"Really? Well, save that story for later. Right now, I want to hear about how you got turned out."

My phone buzzes with an incoming text, giving me just the excuse I need to wave her off.

Mateo: I'm here. Hanging with Trace for a few. Be outside shortly.

Me: See you soon. And fair warning: my friends are in rare form.

Mateo: I'd expect no less. It'll be fun. See you soon, love.

“Oh, hell no!” Phaedra exclaims. “Is that him? I can tell it is by that goofy smile on your face. He’s not wussing out on meeting us, is he?”

I give her a scowl. “He wouldn’t do that. In fact, he’s here and with Trace for now, so pipe down, bitch.”

Lindy sighs in frustration. “Seriously, you two. Both of you need to take a seat. Take several seats, in fact. It’s like you’re always one step away from a girl fight.”

“Probably because we are,” I say with practiced nonchalance. Lindy gives me what-the-fuck eyes then shakes her head in frustration.

“Well, that shit won’t cut it. Not tonight. Tonight, I’m summoning the spirit of Rodney King. Can’t we all just get along?”

“Only for you, Lin,” I reply, my voice deadpan. “Only for you.”

“You know you love me, Alexa,” Phaedra drawls.

“Nope. I really don’t,” I answer, “nevertheless, I won’t let you steal my joy.”

This apparently takes her by surprise, a look of hurt in her expression, and I find that curious. She quickly catches herself and within seconds reverts to the brazen she-devil she likes to present to the world.

“Whatever,” she slices a hand through the air. “If we can’t talk about the hottie yet, at least tell me why you’re suddenly unemployed.”

I give her a synopsis of the past couple of days, which she devours with rapt interest.

“Just like that, then? You just got up, walked out and didn’t turn back?” She nods approvingly. “Very nice, my friend. Didn’t know you had it in ya. But I have to ask: aren’t you a little wary about what happens in the future. And what about when you go get your stuff? That’s bound to feel a little awkward.”

“Apparently her man thinks ahead and handles things like this. He had her shit packed and delivered earlier this afternoon,” Lindy volunteers as I sip my wine and wait for the barrage of questions likely to follow.

“Damn, girl, score,” Phaedra says. “Didn’t know I was about to meet a future saint. Should I go make confession real quick just

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to be sure I'm worthy of being in the same room with his hotness?"

I laugh and shake my head. "No need. But if you try and touch the hem of his garment, I'll have to kill you. Consider yourself warned."

She chuckles. "Duly noted," she says and raises a glass to me. Her face sobers then transforms to something like shock as her eyes fix on a point over my shoulder. I hear footsteps closing in behind me, and the boys' voices carry excitedly in the distance.

"What did I miss?" I hear Mateo ask.

I turn and am immediately struck by the sight before me. He's always beautiful, but tonight, he's wearing the hell out of this suit. And the hair? I'm always a fan, but this man bun thing is hot AF. He walks directly to me, reaches for my hand and pulls me up and into him. His kiss, chaste at the outset, blossoms just a bit more than is polite while others are watching, igniting the need for him that always simmers just beneath the surface, and I force myself to remember that we're not alone, which is as hard as 3-D chess at the moment.

"Our girl here from the look of things," Phaedra says, her voice teasing. She clears her throat. "But that's ok. We'll wait."

He pulls away from me, and I want to protest. Better yet, I want to send the girls packing so I can finish exploring Mateo's mouth, but I manage to find my good manners and make proper introductions. He gives them that smile that slicks panties as he greets my friends warmly before planting himself beside me on the love seat.

"It's nice to finally meet you both," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me the slightest bit closer to him. He rests our joined hands in his lap and turns his attention to Lindy.

"I owe you big thanks, Lindy, for talking us both down a few weeks back."

She smiles sheepishly and shrugs. "That's what besties are for. I'm just glad you both got over yourselves."

Mateo laughs and brings our joined hands to his lips, placing a kiss there.

“Me, too. I’m grateful for the nudge,” he says. I knew that Lindy had run some interference during our rough spot a couple of weeks ago, but it occurs to me that I may not know as much as I may want or need to.

“All I know is that Alexa was a mess before the two of you made peace,” Phaedra notes as she studies us. “But it’s obvious that you make her happy.”

I’m caught off guard by her comment because it’s so unlike Phaedra to reserve the snark and fire that drips from her personality. Mateo looks to me, his eyes soft and adoring. He smiles and squeezes my hand then looks back to Phaedra.

“You should know that she makes me happy, too. But enough of us. I know you’re here to grill me, ladies, and I’m up for the challenge. It’s ok to take off your gloves. I’m ready.”

They both laugh. Lindy, whose been observing us closely for the past few minutes, sits back in her chair. I know my girl, and she was simply waiting for her cue to go all in. It’s what she says next that takes me by surprise.

“No, Mateo, I think I know all I need to.” She passes a satisfied look between the two of us, her eyes eventually settling back on him. “But since you’ve opened the door, I’m happy to walk through it. Tell me about what you do. Alexa says you’re a professor?”

“Yes, I teach psychology at American. And, Luke tells me you’re on a tenure track at UVA?”

“I am,” she answers, and I decide to excuse myself while they exchange vital stats. I’m immediately grateful for the few moments I’ll have away from the grilling. Not that it makes me uncomfortable, but I guess I do find the whole hot-seat-style back-and-forth more than tiresome. It’s probably my inner introvert wanting to put a stop to the uber togetherness of the evening. And who am I kidding? It’s also my inner libido wanting to explore something far more intimate with Mateo than can be accomplished at a friends’ gathering. I smile as I tamp down the all-too real inner struggle. I find my way into the kitchen and as if on cue, the boys begin a rather loud debate from the family room

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about whether LeBron James or Michael Jordan should receive GOAT status.

“This is stupid,” Trace argues. “Each of them dominated the game in their own way. MJ was the GOAT back in the day. King James reigns now.”

“No, stupid,” Tristan counters. “Greatest means there can only be one. That’s what a superlative is, dumbass, and I say MJ now. MJ foreeva!”

I round the corner to see what the bickering is all about just in time to see Treat roll his eyes at his brothers. “You’re both stupid because this argument is stupid!”

“Stay out of this, little man,” Tristan warns. “You know nothing of the struggle.”

“Gentlemen,” I interrupt, fearing that this foolishness could escalate, “keep your voices down to a low murmur, please. When I came into the kitchen, I thought I’d walked onto the set of *Pardon the Interruption*. If you want to channel Wilbon and Kornheiser, be my guest. But do it a bit more quietly. May I remind you that we have guests?”

They look at me in disbelief, as though I have at least three heads and half a brain.

“Mom, chill. It’s casual,” Trace admonishes.

“Yeah, we’re fine, mom. Nothing to see here,” Tristan cosigns with a shrug. I narrow my eyes and shift my gaze to Treat. I can still usually rely on him to heed my warnings rather than keep the brotherly cone of silence sacred. But much to my dismay, he nods and says, “What they said, mom. All’s good.” He gives me a small smile, letting me know he’s not completely comfortable taking up the cause, but he does so to maintain the fraternity on display in the room.

I sigh but won’t be deterred. “It’s not all good. Keep your voices to a low roar or better yet, take this to one of your rooms. I’d like to maintain at least the illusion that my children like and respect each other.

“We’re fine, mom,” Tristan insists. “This is just the way guys communicate.”

“Yeah, well, I’d like it if you could go be guys where I can’t hear you.”

They look at each other then back at me, and there’s no mistaking the sense of satisfaction between them as if they’d accomplished what they set out to do. But I won’t get the chance to voice these suspicions as they salute me and scurry off. I shake my head, not wanting to take the time to dissect what goes through the heads of young boys or why as I head back into the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of wine and return to my garden.

I find Mateo, Lindy and Phaedra well engaged in conversation and release the unconscious tension I must have carried in my shoulders. I don’t know what I thought might happen while I was away from the trio, but I obviously had nothing to fear. Their smiles and laughter warm me.

“So, what did I miss?” I ask as I return to my seat and pour a glass of wine for Mateo. He thanks me and takes a sip from his glass.

“Nothing much,” he says with a wink. “I just put my entire life on display for examination by the elder council here. How’d I do?” he asks, his eyes full of expectation and amusement as he looks to my friends for approval. They readily acquiesce.

“He’s definitely a keeper,” Phaedra chimes in, reaching for the fresh bottle of Viognier I’ve just uncorked.

“You done good, friend,” Lindy says, her voice full of emotion and approval. I want all the details, but because their easy vibe is undeniable, I go with it. This is what matters most to me, having the people I care about the most at peace and at ease with each other.

Chapter 28

Tuesday, October 15
Alexa

Kids in school. Check.
Morning run completed. Check.
Trying not to feel idle AF. Work in progress.

I sigh as I step out of the shower and deeper into my new reality. I consider my new life as I take a seat at the dressing table in my bedroom. I love the unrushed pace of the day and am looking forward to having more days like this ahead. Yesterday disguised these idle feelings because I was hosting a full house. The kids were out for Columbus Day, Mateo joined us around midday, and Lindy didn't head back to Charlottesville until sometime after 7 last evening. Today, I'm having more trouble than I'd like to admit wrapping my mind around the fact that there are no deadlines to meet. No reporters to wave off. I think I might even miss the adrenaline rush that comes from a good sparring session with Sydell. Wait, scratch that. This I absolutely don't miss, and I don't regret my decision to resign at all. But I don't want to feel aimless either.

It's barely 10 a.m., so I decide to tackle at least a few of the loose ends I left in making such a hasty exit from work. Things like letting key contacts like Sage and a few of my producer friends at the networks know that I've literally left the building. I always think that sort of information is best when it's consumed from the source. So, I select my favorite skinny jeans and a blue, waist-cropped sweater, apply my make-up, and tame the mane with the delightful lime and coconut leave-in conditioner that Mateo's mother sent to me after I pestered him into sharing his haircare secrets. She's the apparent genius behind a homemade line of heaven-sent shampoos and conditioners that have become my obsession each morning. I diffuse my happy curls and head to my office to begin reaching out.

My smart phone derails that plan as for the umpteenth time, Sam tries to reach me. Big girl Alexa realizes that whether I like it or not, it's time to begin this conversation. However, Alexa the Brat wants no part in appeasing our emotional oppressor. I curse myself for not blocking his office line as well as his smart phone and decide to let my grown-up half make this decision.

"Good morning, Sam," I answer, keeping my tone light yet business like.

"Lexi, dear, good morning." I gnash my teeth at the greeting, which feels too familiar, too familial under the circumstances. "I was hoping we might get together to talk later today."

"I realize that we need to have a conversation, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

He scoffs at my reply. "Listen, you can outrun me for just so long. We *will* talk, and I insist that you make it a priority."

My responding laugh is mirthless. "Sam, if this is the approach you insist on taking with me, then proceed knowing that you might cause damage that will never be repaired. Meet me in 45 minutes at Java Dreams. I can give you an hour, tops. If that's not enough time for you to say what you need, then we'll have to put this off until some other time. Your choice."

He doesn't immediately respond, making me think he may have hung up. "I'll see you there."

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I put down the phone and sit back in my chair. This is a departure from what I'd envisioned would grab my focus today, but perhaps this is karma's way of clearing obstacles that might prevent my forward progress. I grasp that idea with hopeful desperation as I gather my things and prepare to meet with whatever excuses Sam comes with.

When I arrive at Java Dreams, I try to keep a positive outlook though I well expect this meeting to go off the rails. I've sent Mateo a message to let him know where I am and why. His reply comes moments later.

Mateo: Be good until I see you.

His response brings a smile to my face, which is how Sam finds me when he walks up to greet me.

"Is that good news I see on your face?"

The sound of his voice makes me school my expression, and I place the phone on the table to meet his gaze, mine noticeably cooled now that he's arrived. But, because I'm not a total bitch, I extend the only nicety I can find to lob his way under these circumstances.

"How are you, Sam?"

"I'm well, my dear."

He offers his best smile, and I'm struck by a sad reality. The smile that once brightened my worst days is fading into a past that I'm anxious to shed. I don't want to throw up an eternal roadblock to his efforts, but I can't go back to the status quo between us either.

I nod, keeping my expression all business. "Good. Then where should we begin?"

"Let's begin with whether you're open to coming back to the firm," he says, taking my cue and keeping to the business he said he needed to cover. I shake my head, definitive in my stance.

"I didn't resign on a whim, Sam. I'd been toying with the idea for several weeks. Even when I let you talk me into being your acting head, I'd had more than a few signs that the job wasn't for me. If anything, Sydell's stunt last week only accelerated my exit." I pause to take a sip of my coffee, pinning him with a stare once I

set the cup down. I need him to hear me and let this go. “I’m not right for the firm, and it’s not a fit for me.”

“I can see why you might say that, but I think you should reconsider. There’s something in it for you and for us.”

“I strongly disagree and again must decline.”

He shifts in his seat, and I can see his frustration mounting.

“Perhaps we could call this a leave of absence, give you some time to clear your head and maybe—”

“No,” I interrupt, my gaze colder now. “It’s time I moved on.”

He swallows and studies me for so long I grow uncomfortable before finally asking, “Is it because of our problems, my dear?”

“Our problems?” I ask, mimicking his words and tone. “No, Sam, it’s not about our *problems*. But if you need me to spell things out, I will. I won’t lie to keep a client happy. I won’t skirt the truth to shore up the bottom line. I’ve built an entire career on helping the truth find the light. I won’t detour from that path now. Not for you. Not for anyone.”

“I don’t think that’s fair, Lexi,” he answers defensively, completely ignoring my attempt to ferret out the more pressing issues between us. “I don’t condone lying. That’s not what this is about.”

“Whether or not you see it that way, Sam, I do. I can’t bring you back from that ledge. And I can’t be complicit in what I feel is the peddling of false narratives for the sake of profit.”

Sam looks away from me for a moment. It’s his tell for when he’s searching for a new angle that will cage his opponent and help him regain an advantage. When his eyes again meet mine, the hint of challenge I find there repulses me.

“Tell me it didn’t excite you to shape perceptions about people, people you undoubtedly find despicable and depraved. You’ve always loved a good challenge, Lexi dear. In time, you can find your center at Storey|Fischer. And I can help you. You’ll make us better than ever and find satisfaction the whole time you’re doing it. But you need to give it some time, and you still have much to learn.”

His words deepen my sadness because they confirm the thing that I’ve been denying all along. The man before me, this man who

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sporadically dips his big toe in the sea of fatherhood when the mood strikes or the need arises, will never take the deep dive to save me from the emotional riptide threatening to pull me beneath the surface any time I seek a deeper understanding of my origins. My hands may flail as my heart seeks purchase in this quest, but I can't rely on him to cast me the lifeline I crave to set me afloat. Even now – especially now – he's focused on manipulating me to save his business. I force a smile to my lips, certain it won't be genuine, but having no fucks left to give.

"I'm sorry, but my decision, as I've said several times already, is quite final." I pick up my phone to emphasize my next point. "I have about 20 minutes remaining before I need to get going. Was there anything else?"

His face reddens and his temple pulses.

"When will you stop this?" He leans forward, his voice hushed but no less venom filled. "You're determined to punish me for some perceived slight from the past. I can't tell you what you need to hear, so you won't do what I ask. Is that it? What? You need to hear the words that damned badly? Ok. Fine." He points a finger at me, his eyes narrowed, his face reddened and his expression full of contempt. "I'm. Your. Fucking. Father. There. Is that what you fucking wanted, Alexa? Is that what you needed to hear? Now that I've told you what you obviously already fucking know, what you've known for years, the hell does it change?"

My eyes sheen with tears not at his words but with the bitterness that laces the forced, angry declaration. I struggle to hold them at bay because it feels like a deluge is set to spill, but I somehow manage. I close my eyes, swallow hard, and remind myself that we're in a public place. When I open my eyes, I notice a bit more activity around us and realize that we need to tamp down the heated intensity of our exchange.

"Sam," I say, my voice quiet, my eyes sad as I lean in to shield my words from outside ears as best as I can, "that right there changes everything. But I do thank you. Your words, what you just said, put to rest any of the angst I've felt about having a father who'll be present in my life. See, the only thing I've ever wanted from my father was love and acceptance. To have him claim me.

To know that I mattered more than the things that I can do for him or the optics of his life. For me, this has always been about acknowledgement, and you gave me that. You acknowledged that I don't mean shit to you, not really. You've shown me all along that you have no interest in being a father, well, not beyond standing in the role-model, action hero, man-of-mystery persona, which you've managed to do in spades. That's not what I need. You *can't* and won't give that to me. So, thank you, finally, for standing in the fullness of who you are."

I grab my phone and purse and stand without giving him a chance to reply. He calls after me a couple of times, but I don't answer. I need to leave him and this foolish notion of daddy and me behind. As I hop into my car, I resolve to shed Sam, Storey|Fischer, and any other piece of my past that would keep me anchored in place. I may be heading towards a new reality that I can't yet envision, but I know I'll be doing it free from the pain that Sam inspires – just as soon as I can figure my way past it.

Mateo

This has been the longest semester ever. I'm not sure what it is about these students, but we're more than halfway into the session, and I haven't been able to hook into the points of connection with most of them that make the job exciting and rewarding. Truth is, I can't connect to much of anything right now, which is precisely why moments like this one, when I can be alone in my office, are the ones I've come to enjoy the most over the past days. I use this time to conjure a drop of enthusiasm to take into my next class.

But it's wasted effort. All my thoughts lead me back to Alexa. The woman's wound tight but refuses to discuss the fact that she's in the midst of a major life transition. Her emotions are hitched to the promises and expectations that she couldn't possibly hope to separate from a job she took to please her father. To earn his acknowledgement. Finally. If I had any remaining doubts about my feelings for her, this would excise them for good. Because our hearts beat together, I know that hers is broken. Her voice was flat as she gave me the quick version of her meeting with Sam. She says she's ok, but I know better. I also know better than to push

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her on this. When she's ready to process everything, I'll be there for her as she lets herself feel the fullness of her reality.

As I think about all the ways that I can do something, anything, to ease her torture, I turn to peer through my small window to the outside world, which reveals nothing too interesting. I see cars racing past on the streets below. Students hurry between buildings to the next class or to handle whatever business they have on campus today. But I want none of it. This part of my life steals more joy than it brings. I'm not sure what this all means, but for today at least, it means I'll be leaving the remaining two classes once again in the hands of my capable TA.

As the clarity of what I need to do begins to seep in, an insistent rumble from my phone tears my attention from my window to my desk. The screen announces a call from Lt. Jordan Tomlin with the Loudoun County Sheriff's crime investigation unit. He was the detective who'd been assigned to our case last week and promised to keep me updated about any leads on who may have bashed in my car and why.

He explains that a neighborhood canvass conducted the day after the incident produced a possible lead thanks to a couple of neighbors who'd volunteered the feeds from their video security cameras. From one perspective, you can see what appears to be a male of medium height and build sprinting down the street a few houses down from Alexa's that evening. The video is time stamped several minutes after my car's alarm was triggered, and the runner is dressed in dark clothing, much like the guy we'd seen in the footage captured by the camera mounted at Alexa's front door. The second set of images, from a point farther down the street a few moments later, appears to reveal the same young man without the mask, his blonde hair and cocky grin evident now. The police were now combing the area for this person of interest and had one interesting lead. According to Tomlin, their pointed questioning seems to be homing in on Thad Conway, son of Malady Conway. I'm not at all sure what to make of this news. And there's no way I can even hope to figure it out without Alexa's insight and interpretation.

As if she needed any new equations to solve.

Alexa

I'm grateful to have the next couple of hours alone before the boys get home from school. Sam's words echo in my head, growing ever louder as they sink roots and sprout heartache. I wheel my SUV into the garage and shut the door as soon as I'm sure I'm completely inside and away from the worry beyond these walls. I manage to relax a little once the door connects with the floor, and I sit there, lingering in the dark as I try and make sense of my raging thoughts and chaotic feelings. When the darkness only magnifies the anxiety, I rummage through my purse to find and transfer my phone to a back pocket before climbing out of the truck and feeling my way to the garage door that faces the back of my house. Once I find my mark, I lift the heavy, old-school monstrosity. The cool fall sun begins to pour in the space as I guide the door upward, a task made much easier by Mateo's slight adjustments not long ago. Following our stormy weekend here, he'd lubricated the door and lengthened and weighted the pull cord to make it easier for me to move it along the track. It's the little things like this, the sorts of things he does not because I've asked him or because he's trying to impress, but simply because he wants to, that show me his intent. That and the fact that my man can tend to hover anytime he senses I'm not at peace.

He's called a few times since I gave him the debrief on my time with Sam, and I'll need to let him know I'm ok before he sends someone to see about me, especially after the as-yet unsolved crime against his car last week. I get all that, but I also know that I need some time alone to consider the last few weeks, how profoundly my life has changed, and what comes next. I close the garage door behind me and head to my garden. I may not find answers there, but there should be an abundance of temporary peace inside if I'm lucky. The thought brings memories of Didiane to life, and I send up a prayer of thanks for having had this unexpected angel in my life. Despite her own sadness, she taught me to cultivate a sense of inner joy by learning to appreciate stillness. She believed that by digging in the dirt, one buries his sorrows and sows beauty. I stop just short of the latticed pink and

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white clematis at the entrance to my garden, closing my eyes as these memories and more flash before me like scenes from a View Master reel. I'm struck when I don't feel the calm and stillness that once followed whenever I let my mind conjure her words. Instead, I'm overcome with a wistful longing for times I'll never be able to relive, things I'll never be able to say. For answers that I'll likely never find.

Like why, Samson? Why was it so hard to get you to say that you're my father?

I walk over to the swinging bench beside my tulip tree and plop down, pushing off with my feet to stir up a light breeze and diffuse the sweet scents of autumn seeping from the flowers and foliage around me. I invite the lush fragrance to center me and my thoughts as I survey my space. This is likely the last bloom of the season before a hard freeze announces the flowers' last call, so I'm intentional in my inspection, hoping the hyper focus I'll need to appreciate this beauty in the right way might also redirect my worries and begin to settle my thoughts.

As I drag my eyes between the shrubs, I find pruning, picking, and various other pieces I'll need to add to my to-do list while the sadness, anger, rage, and despair that have given chase for days now finally descend on me. Hot tears sting my eyes and flow down my cheeks as melancholy breaches the dam of denial that once contained these strong feelings. The coming purge brings a sense of relief even as I tumble deeper into the loss and hurt. I've been sidled with this pent-up poison for so long, standing strong at all costs even when my strength had long since been spent.

I sit there contemplating for a time, swiping angrily at my cheeks until it becomes wasted effort. These tears are determined to fall, so I surrender and drop my head to my hands as a wail forces its way from my throat and brings my hurt to the surface. I didn't cry when Sam rejected my push for affirmation those years ago in the garden with Didi. I certainly didn't cry when Trent left. And the tears I shed when I was served with divorce and dissolution papers were for my children, never for me. But today, every sob, every moan, each prickling stab of pain bears my name.

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As I face up to the pain of loss directly, maybe for the first time in my life, I drag my feet beneath me and lie down on the bench, curling myself inward as this pain slices open the tender spaces in my heart, retrieving and releasing years of hurt and loss. Having always been a think-by-feel kind of girl, I process as I purge, digging around in my head for any and every artifact that might explain Sam's anger today. Had I loved him only because he seemed to care when no one else truly did? Or was it that I loved the idea that he, that *someone*, came closer than anyone had to treating me in a way I thought a father might treat his daughter? One of these things must be true because the man I met with earlier today bore no hallmark of having ever lived up to either dream. How could I ever have had such high hopes for a relationship with a man so thoughtless, so careless with his regard for others? My mind conjures a million permutations of what ifs and why nots as I give my heart license to excavate the past, and eventually, I lose my way on this exploration as despair and disdain pull me into the depths of sleep.

I have no sense of the passage of time nor of where I am really when I realize my smart phone is vibrating beside me. As my mind reconnects with consciousness, I reach for the phone and manage a groggy hello.

"Lexi, sweetheart, where are you?"

My mind clicks things into place slowly, but I realize it's Mateo. I'm just not sure why he sounds so anxious.

"At home. I'm at home, Mateo. Why?" I hear myself speaking though my brain isn't fully back online.

"Because I've been calling you for at least a half hour. Luke has, too. He and Treat got worried and called me when they found your truck in the garage but couldn't find you."

As I sit up and will my mind back to full throttle, I feel the deliberate onset of the banging headache you get after a hard cry. I'm not sure if it was the actual pain or the outline of my morose mood that makes me groan into the phone as my mind fills in the blanks left by my emotional crash and resulting slumber. I glance at my phone and mark the time. It's a little past 3:30. That means

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that Treat's been here for about 40 minutes. Luke has early release on Tuesdays, so that means he arrived more recently. Say, maybe 25 minutes ago.

"I must have fallen asleep," I say quietly as my mind wonders rather loudly why these geniuses didn't try looking for me more thoroughly. When I was a child and would misplace a toy or other item in the house, Mama Esperanza would scold me once she found it laying somewhere in plain sight. *If it had been a snake, it would have bitten you.* The ancient thought makes me smile, well, as much as I feel like smiling at the moment.

"They couldn't have looked too long. I'm in the garden."

"She's in the garden!" I hear Mateo yell away from his phone, which confounds me at first until I realize that he must be here as well. I see I'm right moments later when my sliding glass door opens with force to reveal a frantic Treat dashing towards me.

"Mom!" he yells and hurls himself into my arms with such force the swing takes off on a herky-jerky arc, the chains moving the bench along with an added, unintended twist. It takes some effort to grab my boy while using my feet to halt our glide. When I've stilled us, I reassure my child the best way I know how as I hold his head to my shoulder and try to stay his sobs. With gentle rubs to his back and the intangible comfort that comes from a mother's arms, I bring him back from the place his fears damned him, cooing in his ear, and rubbing his curly brown hair until I find a giggle and force a shy smile. It's not lost on me that this boy has a vested interest in me in a way his brothers don't. Treat never knew his father. Not really. I'm his sole lifeline, and I respect that by letting him and his brothers know where I am always. So, I don't wonder that the smallest change in my routine would send him into a panic. I'll need to help my dear Treat to see the many ways that I live inside of him now and always. But that comes much, much later.

I shift my focus to Mateo and Luke, who've stood to the side in deference to Treat's passionate greeting and mournful relief. Relief from the worry that evidently gripped them all for a time, the evidence of which is etched into their faces. Luke looks to be struggling with his feelings, clearly relieved but also affected by

whatever fears his mind had entertained. Mateo, though. His expression grounds me. Humbles me. The grief he carries is a collage of the fears he, Luke, and Treat must have felt in those moments they feared I might be in danger or worse. It was his worst-case scenario and reflects the interconnectivity of our lives. Yet, he waits patiently, clearly reigning himself in. But his face tells a different story. Mateo wears the relief of a lover who'd feared – and apparently imagined – the worst. And for a moment, I'm not sure who needs my comfort more. Fortunately, I don't have to wonder on this when Luke refocuses our attentions to the thing that apparently has them all on edge in the first place.

“Auntie, no disrespect,” he begins, his hand pinned to his heart, “but you should probably make sure somebody's got your back at all times now that it looks like your ex man is checking for you again.” He shrugs his shoulders and shifts his eyes to the ground. “I can't tell you your business, but maybe we could all share locations and shit. I mean, damn,” he swears as he tears at his short dread locs, an errant tear rolling down his cheek, “nothing can happen to any of us is all. You know. We're family!”

I do know. Yes, I do, my excellent young man. I don't have the words he needs to hear either – at least not today. But I walk to where he stands so tall, yet, so very vulnerable, this wise and loyal warrior, and wrap one arm around his back and urge his head to my shoulder with the other. As he folds himself to settle in there, his arms crossing reflexively at my waist, I take great pride in the man Luke has become. He may not have had his father around, but he's always had the benefit of all I could pour into his heart and head on top of having a mother who believes he hung the moon. Though we share no genetic ties, he's as much mine as he is Lindy's.

I set about the business of trying to reassure my noble knights three that all's well. That I'm no damsel in distress. Not really, anyway. I attribute my counter-rhythms and any odd comings and goings to my recent decision to walk away from what I thought I wanted to do with my career, to my desire to explore new things. I apologize for alarming them when all I really wanted to do was try and find some peace and perspective as I work out my way

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forward and figure out what I want to do next. This seems to satisfy Luke and Treat, which is all I'm after anyway. But the look Mateo and I exchange lets me know we'll be exploring my claim in greater detail later.

"I'm glad you're good, Auntie," Luke offers with a broad smile that distracts me momentarily from the gravity in Mateo's eyes. As quickly, his face sobers and sets me on notice. "But real talk, I think you'd be smart to keep Mateo around while you sus out all you got going on."

...sus out all you got going on. My mind sticks on his words and finally circles back to the thing that's been tickling my brain since I heard how agitated Mateo was on the phone.

"Did something happen? From the way you're all acting, it's like you thought I'd been taken or something."

I lighten my tone to punctuate how over the top this is starting to seem. But the mood among us shifts as Mateo walks over, takes my hand, and leads us to a spot on the circular brick wall. He looks to Luke and then to Treat before angling himself towards me.

"Lex, when Treat got home, he came in through the garage. When he saw your truck parked inside and your purse on the seat but couldn't find you, he got worried."

That explains the boy's reaction a bit better, so I relax my shoulders.

"Wait, Lex," Mateo cautions and reaches over to brace my shoulders. "When Luke pulled up, he found a gray envelope addressed to you propped at the front door."

"Ok. I live here.

"Lex, it's some sort of threat."

I narrow my eyes, my mind not even wanting to comprehend what he's saying.

"If it's addressed to me, how do you know what's inside?" I scold, though playful in my rebuke.

He shakes his head. "I don't know what's inside. But I saw the picture on the outside. It's definitely a threat, love. And now that we've told you, it's time to tell the police."

I try to get him to explain but he urges me up and leads us all inside. As we climb the steps, I hear Tristan and Trace chopping

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it up in the kitchen. Our collective expressions halt their banter, and they follow along as Mateo enters my office and heads for the envelope in question. He hands it to me, and I blanch as I realize what I'm looking at. The name Alli Caverton is scrawled boldly in barely legible handwriting on one side. I flip it over to find a headshot of myself with my eyes scratched out and the universal "No" symbol encircling my head. I stare at the large red circle with a diagonal slash through the center, not sure which shocks me more: the threat implied or the name on the envelope. Once I see what's inside the envelope, it's clear that the answer is neither.

I hate you! Yes, I do!

I know what I'm gonna do...

With a banged-up Jag and a couple pranks more,

No more colored neighbor whore!

I can make no sense of this. My feet feel leaden as time leaves me behind while I unwind this nonsense rhyme. In what feels like slow motion, my mind processes the implications against the unlikely, unseemly suggestion of who might be behind the intimidation. Only one person called me Alli, and I purchased the right to stop using his last name when we were divorced. But the childish message throws me. I'd be surprised if Trent ever heard of Barney & Friends let alone the various repurposed versions of the show's theme song calling for the purple dinosaur's death. Then, there's the actual message inside the rhyme, which completely departs from anything Trent would say or do. I don't think. But do I really know?

"Mom, what's all this? What's going on?"

The urgency in Tristan's voice breaks through my thoughts and brings my mind back to real time. I turn to look at him, but words fail me. I have no idea how to answer his questions. I can only ever remember one other time in my life when I felt as powerless as I do now. I was honest and direct then, and he deserves the same from me – once I know what's true. I decide it's best to remain a bit circumspect for now.

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“It’s a threat, Tris,” I answer quietly. “The person who did this wants me to believe it’s Trent.” I look to each of the boys and Mateo before I say what I know with conviction. “But this isn’t him.”

Mateo steps forward to take the contents of the envelope from my hands. He places the packet on my desk and turns to me, his face somber.

“Let’s let the police figure it out,” he says, picking up our discussion from there. That’s when he tells us about the call that he received from the police investigator updating him on their investigation into who vandalized Mateo’s car the other night and their interest in Thad Conway.

“Who? Wild Style?” Trace asks.

“Who’s Wild Style?” I ask.

“That’s what they call Thad,” Trace answers. And he giggles.

“Don’t laugh, bruh. Thad is crazy town for real. Always has been.” Tristan’s face is sober. “When we used to go to Amberleigh, he’d always pick fights and ridicule other kids. For no reason. He’s a dick for real. But more than that, it was like something was wrong with him. Like he should have had one of those dedicated helpers at school in case he lost it and hurt himself or one of the other kids.”

I shudder as Tristan’s recollection takes me back to the days just after Trent left. School became their biggest challenge as they tackled existential considerations like why their father didn’t want to be their father anymore. From failing tests to being exiled to the principal’s office one too many times, Tristan’s anger manifested through his interpersonal relationships during those tense months after his father left us. As he mentions Amberleigh, the local public school the boys attended at the time, I recall run ins with this Conway child, who, indeed, seemed to be living with some challenges around managing his emotions.

“That’s hardly enough to indict the child,” I say as I think aloud. But it’s damn curious.

“Either way, Lex, we need to take this seriously,” Mateo intercedes. His patience is worn. His resolve resolute.

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“Whether it’s this kid or some other nut, someone’s trying to intimidate you.” His eyes burn into me in that way they do when he’s determined to have his way. “We need to let the police know. And I’d really feel better if you all came home with me while we let them do their job.”

I know he’s right. My instincts tell me to pack up and go with him. Go now. And go expeditiously. I can’t seem to make this decision as I stand here facing a reality that makes no sense. Between dealing with my fallout with Sam and now this, I’m not sure I have the capacity to feel anything else today or anytime soon. Though he’s been careful to avoid saying too much or being too overprotective, Mateo’s been studying me and cataloging my reactions, so I’m not surprised when he makes the decision for me and moves us on to our next tasks.

After he phones his contact at the county sheriff’s office to share this latest find, he tells Luke to keep my sons occupied and leads me to the basement where he sits me on the sofa and begins to work his will.

“Alexa, love. You’ve had a hell of a day. After we talk with the police, I want you to pack a bag and come with me.”

My head’s still in the fog that clouds my judgment and decision making, which probably explains why I hear him but can’t put all or any of what I’m feeling or thinking into words yet. “I’m fine. Really,” I say stiffly, not knowing how else to reply. But he’s having none of my evasion today.

“No, you’re not. You don’t know how you’re doing because you refuse to stop long enough to figure it out,” he claps back as gently as he’s able. “And then when you do bother to stop, you’re so busy trying to prove how strong you are by carrying everything on your own.”

“What do you mean trying to prove?” I bite back, incredulous at his words yet ashamed as they strike my most sensitive nerve. “This family has me to rely on. Me! Just me! I can’t leave the boys alone, Mateo. I know that Luke’s here, but on a weeknight with school the next day, they need an adult to supervise. So, no. I’m staying here.”

MASKED INTENT

“Lexi,” he says, his voice softer now as he reaches out to pull me into his chest, his arms cloaking me to shield and protect from my life’s worries and complications. But I can’t fully relax into his comfort as despair begins to steamroll my thoughts. When he pulls back, his expression is resolute. Maybe even a bit demanding.

“What I’m trying to say is that you have me, too. Let me help you take care of everything and everyone so you can have the space you need to take care of yourself, love. In fact,” he hurries on as I try to jump in, “Why don’t you call Phaedra? Maybe she can come over. Take the boys to Lindy’s and stay there to watch over them. She doesn’t have kids, right? I’m sure she’d help you out.”

I search his eyes and know with certainty that he only wants what will bring me peace. It wouldn’t be the first time Phaedra watched the kids. In spite of our weird dynamic, she and the boys are more than great together. I get no farther in my consideration when Mateo brings my over analysis to an abrupt end.

“Sweetheart,” he urges me, “make the call. Let me take care of everything else.”

I nod, giving him the only answer I can. I have enough self-awareness to know when I need help. And yet, my mind chooses this precise moment to add to my confusion, grief, and indecision. I field a host of wild, random cautions against giving myself over to him so completely this soon. Warnings about trust granted before it’s earned. Cautionary tales of opportunistic manipulation. That uneasy feeling that amplifies itself a hint more each time my mind finds reason to examine Mateo’s words and intentions more closely. I know these fears haven’t crossed my mind for the last time. I also know that my mind is likely using these cautions as an early warning system, a notice to vacate all matters of the heart before they have a chance to break things given my track record of failed relationships with the men in my life. The front door chime ends my hypno-trance, bringing a halt to my wild imaginings and giving some momentary relief. Now that the police have arrived, I’ll need every bit of my focus to help me understand how to manage this threat and understand why I would be anyone’s target.

KIMBERLY GREER

Mateo stands and reaches for my hand. “We need to go and deal with the police.” He pulls me up and places a quick, hard smack on my temple. “Why don’t you call Phaedra while I give the police the basics. When you’re done, meet us in your office?”

I manage the best smile I can and say, “Ok. I can do that.”

I follow him upstairs on shaky legs and with even shakier faith in my ability to make the right decisions.

“Phae, I need you.”

I count it a win when I don’t choke on the words, but I know this woman, and I’ve played precisely into her hands.

“Ok, now let’s see. Is it April Fools? Or maybe Fuck with Phaedra day! No, wait—”

I sigh impatiently, too raw and dismayed to play around with this.

“Stop it, Phae. I’m serious.”

I immediately regret all the sparring and faintly veiled insults that must have had as jarring an effect on her as hers have for me. So, I let that knowledge shape the intent behind everything I tell her next.

“I promise you I will explain more once you get here. But for now, know this.” I pause as my voice begins to quaver, giving myself a chance to put some bit of calm back in place.

“I confronted my father today. Didn’t go well. And then after I got home, someone left a death threat at my door.”

I almost choke on the words as I let my simple reality percolate, and at first, I’m not sure if I say them aloud for her benefit or mine. But I can’t worry about that now. I have to make this ask.

“I know it’s a lot to ask of you. But would you please, if you can, *please* come stay with my guys for tonight? I know Luke’s here,” I try to explain but the sobs lingering beneath my words betray me at last.

“Shh, honey. Of course,” she coos into the phone, her voice laced with worry and anxiety. “You know I got you. But you don’t sound good. Are you alone?”

“No, Mateo’s here.”

MASKED INTENT

“Good. That’s really good. So, let me make sure things are in line here. I’ll text you when I leave. Expect me 45 minutes later.”

“Phae, it’ll be the heart of rush hour,” I say as I glance at the clock and try to calm myself. It’s 4:30, and at this time of day, it’ll take her at least an hour to get to me from the heart of Tysons Corner, and that’s on a day when the congested roadways carry drivers on their way without incident. The minute anyone makes a foul move, the commute quickly becomes a game of Frogger where, for many, the object of the game is to keep moving at all costs, even if it costs someone else. I give her the sternest caution I can muster and thank her profusely.

“No need for thanks, babe. Just,” she hesitates a moment then says, “Take it easy until I can get there, Alexa. I don’t like hearing you like this.”

“I’ll be ok, Phae. We’ll talk when I see you.”

I kill the call before the next wave of despair overtakes me.



I manage to gather myself and scrape up a bit of composure on the way to my office to join Mateo and Lt. Tomlin about five minutes later. The men are hovered over my desk to study the contents of the offending envelope, and their combined energies when they turn to acknowledge me put me on high alert.

“Ms. Caverton, I’m Lt. Tomlin with the Loudoun County Sheriff’s Office.”

Tomlin extends his hand in greeting, his grip firm and sure. His cop’s eyes, deep brown and penetrating, arrest me, and I can’t shake the feeling that I’d never want to be caught on the wrong side of justice on his watch. If a cop has a certain look, then Tomlin was forged directly from that mold. I’d say he’s roughly six feet with sienna hued skin, a head full of close-cropped black curls, broad shoulders, and a no-nonsense attitude. He clearly spends a fair amount of time at the gym, which adds to the intimidation factor.

KIMBERLY GREER

“It’s actually Winston. I’m Alexa Winston. Caverton was my name before my divorce several years ago. May I offer you something to drink? Some water or coffee?”

He nods and says, “Pardon me, then. And no thank you. I’m fine. Why don’t we have a seat and chat for a bit?”

I pass a look between the two men as an unexpected rush of nerves grips me, grounding me with the gravity of the past several days, warning me not to write this off as mischief. Mateo nods in encouragement and walks over to take a gentle hold of my arm and usher me to a seat on the small sofa across the room. Once I’m seated, he settles in beside me, and Lt. Tomlin drops into the adjacent leather chair.

“So, then, Ms. Winston, Dr. Da Rocha showed me the envelope that was left at your door. Any idea who might have a grudge against you?”

I shake my head. “Not enough to issue threats against my life,” I say.

He eyes me as he considers my response then asks, “Let me ask a different question. Have you had any run-ins with anyone you can think of recently?”

“Again, nothing that would rise to the level of threat-making, Lieutenant.”

I go on to explain my recent resignation from S|F|S and the sour response it evoked from my colleagues and from Hedge.

He nods. “And what about your ex-husband? Dr. Da Rocha mentioned that you’ve had a couple of uncomfortable conversations with him lately.”

“Uncomfortable, yes. But threatening? No. And I don’t think he’s the one who left this envelope because some things just don’t track.”

The pity and patronizing expression in his eyes put me on edge, but I won’t challenge him on that for now as he presses on with his questions.

“Ok. What things?” he asks.

“The whole thing, actually! This stupid rhyme is a riff on the theme song from a children’s TV show. I’d bet my life that Trent

MASKED INTENT

has never so much as heard of Barney. No way he'd be writing rhyming words to it."

"Ok. Anything else?"

"Just in general, Lieutenant, none of it fits with the behaviors of the man I was once married to."

I pause and look to Mateo briefly, needing him to understand what I need to say next so he won't push the Trent-as-doer theory too hard.

"Yes, he's the only one who ever called me Alli, but I feel like that's more of a red herring than a useful clue. Until a couple of weeks ago, I hadn't had contact with my ex-husband in four years. I can't see him taking time to print and deface photos of me. And I definitely can't imagine him as a car vandal. I just can't see it. He might be creepy, but I don't believe he's criminal."

The officer studies me for what seems like endless minutes.

"You seem certain of that, Ms. Winston. But we'll come back to that in a little while. Are you familiar with Thad Conway?"

"I know who he is," I answer as dispassionately as possible. I may not like his mother, but he's innocent of her bad acts.

The tale he weaves over the next several minutes is a fantastic-sounding yarn that might frame the early plot of a rebel-teen movie. Apparently troubled and unruly, Thad Conway has a dubious reputation among county deputies. From truancy to trespassing and some evidence of online stalking, the boy's actions have granted him frequent flyer status at the nearby satellite sheriff's office. Each time, his mischief escalates, each act more daring or disturbing than its predecessor. A series of ding-dong-ditches. A banged-up mailbox. A box of human feces deposited on a nearby doorstep. Suspected cyberthreats to two ex-girlfriends. At 13, when his misdeeds began mounting, Thad received his most severe punishment to date: a few months at a juvenile detention facility. Since then, no charge against him can withstand the very loud, privileged interventions from his mother and uncle, a local criminal defense attorney. Together, they've talked his way out of more than a few scuffles, skirmishes, and bonafide charges, and I feel winded by the time Tomlin's completed this run down of deeds.

“So, the boy’s troubled,” I offer, stating the obvious. “But what reason would he have to come for me?”

“We’re hoping maybe you can help us with that, Ms. Winston. As I shared with Dr. Da Rocha earlier today, we do have video that seems to suggest that he was the one who smashed up his car last week. That’s circumstantial, of course. We’ve gotten a positive ID on him in your neighbor’s video. But we can’t prove that’s the same person in your camera feed. So, we’d like to bring in a forensic team to check for fingerprints around your home once more just so we have all bases covered.” He continues with caution. “I also need you to take a moment and think about any issues their family may have had with you and your family.”

My reply is instant. “Malady Conway and my ex had an affair. That wouldn’t explain any grudge the child might have, though.”

I shake my head again, frustrated with this line of questions.

“And even then, it would be the other way around, me having issues with her, don’t you think?”

“At this point, we can’t rule anything out, Ms. Winston.”

The concern in his voice intensifies as he visits the more ominous motive. “Including and especially the fact that this may not only be personal. We’ll need to look into whether the boy has shown any affinity for white supremacist groups in the past.”

I try out his words and test the detective’s highly logical conclusion. Malady may be lots of things, but I’d be shocked if being racist was among them. Of course, her son may hold radically different views. Either way, Tomlin’s words give my anxiety that final push over the top.

“Well, what I just told you is the beginning and end of my thoughts and concerns over the Conways,” I reply quietly as my phone announces the arrival of a text message. “She’s the one you need to ask.” I glance at the phone to redirect my anxious thoughts and see that Phaedra’s on her way.

“Unfortunately, she hasn’t been that cooperative up to this point,” Tomlin replies. “But it’s time to change that. I’ll also be reaching out to your ex-husband. I know you don’t believe he’s behind this, but he may know something that might help us solve this case.

“In the meantime,” he continues, his attention focused more on Mateo now, “I’ll have a patrol car park outside the house, and an officer will drive through periodically to keep an eye on things. Ms. Winston, until we know more, be careful of your movements, and if there’s some place else you and your family can stay for a while, you may want to think about doing that.”

Chapter 29

Mateo

We put some much-needed distance between us and the day’s events when we all meet up at Lindy’s house an hour or so later. Like every place around here, it’s about 20 minutes away from Alexa’s. Ever since we let the boys know that they’d be going to Luke’s house while the police figured out what was going on, Luke had taken command of them, lightening their worries by turning them into fun as they packed up to leave. I guess he used their questions as his source material to come up with random clues, crazy rhymes, and brilliant riddles for them to solve. With each quip, he’d transformed this too-real situation into an escape room for the boys, who were well and deep into the espionage and intrigue of the situation. I salute this young man

fiercely for his efforts, which remain keen and on point despite his own, apparent emotional upset and anxiety about Alexa's safety.

As soon as we arrive, Luke lures them to the basement with promises of as many games of Mario Kart as they can stand and pizza delivery, leaving Alexa, Phaedra, and me to put our plan in place. I try to stay in the background while Alexa fills Phaedra in, her voice otherworldly as if she's unfolding a tall tale she'd learned as a child instead of sharing the details of the past several hours of her life. Phaedra's concern stiffens her shoulders as well as her resolve.

"Sweetheart, I can't tell you how to feel. Maybe don't feel anything right now. Maybe that's the best thing."

She searches Alexa's eyes carefully like she'll find the answers she needs there.

"I can't imagine what you're going through. But here's what you know and can feel good about. Your boys will be safe here with me and Luke for as long as you need us. I'll make sure they get to school. Do their homework. Take a bath. All that good stuff."

Alexa gives her a grateful smile. "I know, Phae. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you right now. I hope Stephan wasn't too put out about this."

Phaedra waves a hand in the air in dismissal when I mention her husband.

"And if he was? Fuck Stephan. You and I both know what's up. I do what I want. And what I want to do now is help take care of you in the best way that I can. You leave this to me, you go with Mateo, and let him take care of you. Listen to him. Do what he says."

I take the opportunity to highjack their conversation when Phaedra glances over to me, eyeing me in a way that lets me know we'll need to have a talk away from Alexa's ears. It's not the right time for what I say next, but I figure it's worth it to reroute Alexa's thoughts and get her out of the room for a few minutes. I walk to where she stands and bend to whisper for her ears only.

MASKED INTENT

“Why don’t we get out of here,” I suggest then kiss her ear lobe gently, “and go find out whether you purr or moan when I make you do what I say.”

She tries but fails to hide the hitch in her breath as her eyes flutter closed. She smiles at the suggestion as I kiss her lightly on her forehead before stepping out of her reach. Startled and off kilter, her eyes fly open, and she flashes me a look of disbelief.

“Seriously, Da Rocha?” she protests with a wry smile.

I smirk. “Scold me later, love.”

I walk behind her, grab her shoulders, and point her towards the basement door.

“Why don’t you go check on the boys, see if they need anything before we go? Just let me talk with Phaedra first, and I’ll be down in a sec.”

“Yeah, I need to be sure they’re ok with all of this and that they know I’ll be fine. And, Phae?”

“Hush, Alexa. It’s nothing. Now go say bye to those boys, so you two can be on your way.”

Once Alexa’s downstairs, her girl gets to work. She lobs question after question about where we’ll be going and how I plan to keep Alexa safe. Though I’ve done all I can think of to reassure her, Phaedra still isn’t fully convinced or trusting of me for that matter. So, I ask about the possibility of booking a room at her hotel. That way, she’ll know where and how to get to us if necessary. She agrees and glances up at me periodically as she handles the details. I can tell she has something to say, so I prompt her.

“Phaedra, is there something you need to say to me? Whatever it is, it’s fine,” I urge her, needing to break through her awkward assessment.

“You seem to love her,” she comments, her voice tentative.

I frown. “Be certain of that. I do.”

She studies me a bit longer. “Yes, well. I don’t believe in love. I believe in what I can see, and what I see is that you two have insane chemistry. And you trade on that when you need to like a few minutes ago.”

I chuckle. “You’re right we do, and yes, I did. But only to give us a chance to have this conversation.” I pause before continuing, needing a moment to feel out this hardened woman as she considers my words.

“You’ve been signaling that you wanted a minute, and here it is. Say what’s on your mind.”

“Like I said, I see that you’re into her. What I don’t know, Mateo, is whether you’ll take care of her. All of her. She’s more fragile right now than I’ve ever seen her. I don’t expect you to know that. But I do expect you to handle her like she might break at any minute.”

“Don’t—”

She holds up her hand to stay my words. “You’ve known her for like a minute, so I suggest you listen right now. She’s going to want to push you away, but you need to stay by her side in spite of that. She’ll make it look like she’s perfectly fine. But she’s anything but. You need to keep an eye on her and be there for her no matter what. And if you can’t do that, you let me know, so I can take over.”

“Phaedra, I’ve got her. All of her. I promise.”

I let her see my conviction, and she nods, though I’m not convinced she’s convinced.

“See that you do, Mateo,” she says warily. “Keep an eye on our girl.”

She gives a curt nod before heading downstairs to join Alexa and the boys. I stare after her for a time as I run her words through my head. I realize it wasn’t the words as much as their energy that struck my ear wrong. But figuring her out will have to wait. Right now, all I want to do is get Alexa out of here, away from her children, away her friend, and away from an endless stream of questions and anxiety.

Alexa

“Baby, we’re here. Wake up.”

Mateo’s voice sounds muffled in the distance as my mind tries to make sense of my surroundings.

MASKED INTENT

“Lexi,” he urges again, sounding closer now as my eyes flutter open and I begin to stir from my perch on his lap. He nudges me gently until I pull myself to sitting and regain my bearings. I can’t have slept for long though my brain is slow to rid itself of its haze as a tension headache begins to pound. A few more moments pass before I recognize the valet stand that fronts the Ritz Carlton and begin to slide myself from Mateo’s lap. Before I can fully extricate myself from our tangle, he tugs my arm and pulls me back in as he claims my mouth with a kiss that soothes and reassures as much as it incites my body to seek his. I’m disappointed when he pulls back and I’m left wanting, needing to feel him touch me. His responding smile is flirty at first, but he quickly dials back to something that looks like alarm and concern as he studies me. Whatever he sees, he keeps to himself, saying simply, “Let’s get you upstairs, love.”

I’ve walked through this place dozens of times, attending conferences, meeting clients, hosting events, enduring galas. On each occasion, my business here was always that – just business. As I plod down the hall behind Mateo and pass room after room, it occurs to me that as with everything, he’s made it his quest to make my first guest experience here unforgettable. I smile to myself as we make our way to the hotel’s presidential suite. When we reach our destination, he stops just short of the door, fishes into his pocket, and grabs his key card. Once the door’s sensor clicks and glows green, he pushes it open and motions me into our safe harbor.

“You couldn’t just get us a regular room?” I tease as I survey the expansive space. “You had to move us in?”

“Not my idea,” he says as he walks into the bedroom to hang up his jacket before returning to meet me in the suite’s luxurious living room. “But I’m not complaining either.” He walks over and kisses me on the cheek. “And you can thank Phaedra for the upgrade.”

I sigh. “Looks like I have a lot to thank Phaedra for.”

“We’ll get to all that, Lex. How about we settle in, get you relaxed.”

He doesn't await my reply but instead suggests that I go explore the rest of the suite while he orders our dinner. I'm not certain when I last ate, and I don't know how well food will go down now. I can't even decide whether I'm hungry, so I decide not to decide and begin to wander around.

Mateo

As I watch her pace nearly every square inch of the space, I feel Alexa shut down severely as the reality of the day's events come rushing back at her in force. I try without much success to decode what's going through my girl's head, but she's lost to me for now. This, of course, will never do, but for now, I know I need to leave her to her mind and whatever storms live there to ravage her psyche and pillage her heart.

Room service delivers just before the hour. It's nearly 8:00 I notice as I grab her from wandering and sit her down to eat. Alexa's said little about the time she spent with Sam since we arrived. She really hasn't said much of anything I realize as I watched her wander from room to room, pacing and talking to herself, lost to her thoughts, and, I suppose, her grief. I allowed her the freedom to explore worst-case scenarios while I ordered our dinner: Delmonico steak, garlic mashed potatoes, apple pie with melted cheddar cheese for me, the filet steak salad with poached egg for her, and a bottle of Viña Cobos "Cobos" Malbec. Nothing like a \$300 bottle of wine to wash away the blues and hopefully get her to a place where she can talk about what she's feeling.

"I know you're used to asking all the questions, but it's my turn now. Tell me about your time with Sam. Are you ok?"

"It's fine, Mateo. I'm fine. Please stop fussing," she says as she moves the greens in her salad around on her plate. Her eyes tell me what she won't, and so I press a little deeper.

"No, love, it's not fine."

She's been making a good show of eating but has barely taken a bite since room service delivered our meal. I reach over to stay the hand jacking the food around until she looks up at me.

"It's killing me to see you so sad. Tell me what I can do."

MASKED INTENT

She sighs and shakes her head, takes a deep drink from her wine glass, and sighs again.

“There’s nothing anyone can do, Mateo. There’s nothing worth talking about. Sam made it clear how he feels. In fact, it hit me today that he’s always been clear about things between us. If anything was going to change, it would have a long time ago. So, it’s stupid for me to feel bad about any of this. And honestly, it’s nothing I didn’t already know. I just need some time so I can put it in its proper place in the back of my mind. Once it’s archived, I’ll move on.”

The small smile she flashes is anything but convincing, but I hang back, wanting her to say more but not wanting to overwhelm her.

“I just—” she begins as she tries but fails to catch the sob that breaks free at last, her hand slamming with force onto the suite’s stupidly large dining room table. When her head follows, I walk over to where she sits and take the seat to her left. As I stroke her hair, her tears begin to fall with urgency finally. Her despair slices clean to the deepest, darkest parts of me, scraping and scarring my heart, and I reach for her.

“Hey, come here,” I urge, moving my hand to her back, wanting her to allow me in so I can help bear the weight of her pain.

“I know it hurts. I’m so, so sorry, love.”

I continue stroking her hair and back, desperate to absorb her hurt and soothe her heart. It takes a beat for her to respond, and when she does show me her face, I’m devastated by the confusion, resentment, and anguish I see in her eyes. It makes me want to hurt something, someone, anything if it’ll end her distress. She scrambles into me, climbing onto my lap and burying her face into my shoulder. My arms draw her as close as I can, and as her body shakes with rage, she silently lets her pain spill. I scoop her up and head to the master bedroom. I want her feeling comfortable and safe as she purges and processes the things that brought her to the breaking point.

I’m not sure how much time passes before she’s cried her last, but after long minutes, I hear her breathing even out, and I know

she must have fallen asleep. I keep her in my arms even as she tries to wiggle away. I need her to know that I'm here to be her strength when she's too weak, fight her battles when the war games get to be too much, and blow up the world when she's had enough of its sorrow. I let that sink in as calm blankets me and I fade away with her.

Alexa

As I return to consciousness after an obviously troubled sleep, I feel Mateo's strong arms cloak me protectively, possessively. The sun has long-since set, but I have no true sense of time as I linger in the space between sleep and wakefulness. I raise a hand to brush away the errant wisps of hair insistent on flopping into my eyes, and I squirm a little to wrestle free. In protest, Mateo tightens his grip around my waist and nuzzles his head into my shoulder. I try to settle back to sleep as my mind wanders through the unpleasant collision of memories and recollections of my talk with Sam. My problems remain unsolved, unchecked, and largely inexplicable. I can only assume Mateo feels this odd energy leaching from me when he groans and repositions me until I'm on my back, effectively intercepting my maudlin thoughts.

"Oh no, that will never do, sweet Alexa."

He rolls over on top of me and takes his assessment. His eyes sear and scrape me from head to toe, muting my despair with his desire.

"I want you feeling better, baby. What can I do?"

I shrug. "Can you make me forget?"

He smiles and dips his head to my neck where he plants a firm kiss.

"Let's play a game," he says.

I smile at him and nod, and it's thankful and genuine. Raw just like me right now. This happy distraction, this small, simple, ridiculous playing of games, this us thing, is manna for my stings and fears. I relax into his stare as he traps and reels me in. He licks his lips and gives me his rules.

"Listen close, Lex," he directs me, "tonight, I only want you thinking about one thing."

MASKED INTENT

He levers himself down and hovers over me in a low push-up as he brings his lips to mine and lures my tongue out to play with his. He takes me over with each suck and pull of my lips, his passion enlivening my body, releasing me from the stupor I've burrowed down into as the day unfolded. I moan in protest when he pulls away, but he brings a finger to my mouth to hush me.

"Two rules," he warns with a playful smile as he strokes my bottom lip. "Do exactly as I say, and don't complain. If you complain, we can't play our game."

I hum my assent and ask, "What's this one called?"

His face sobers. He reaches to my shoulder, fists a length of my hair, wraps it around his hand, and gives it a firm tug.

"Let me love you," he whispers, his voice a plea as he pulls my hair to the side and dusts kisses down the column of my neck. "But we can't play," he continues in my ear after a time, "if you don't do exactly as I say, when I say and how I say."

He pulls up to hover over me. "I want you to think about that, about letting me love you, letting me make you feel good. Just that. Only that. Understand?"

I giggle and shake my head.

"You don't yet," he says with a sexy, arrogant, knowing smile as he sits up more now and begins unbuttoning my blouse. "But you will."

My nipples pebble as he pulls away the fabric and tosses it to the floor. He leans forward to grab my hands, locking them down with his own before sliding down my body and bringing his mouth to my chest. He circles the tip of my left breast with teasing licks that send shocks of pleasure and longing everywhere, my core warming and clenching for him. I arch my back, my body needing, craving more as he praises me.

"That's it, baby. Just feel me."

Our hands still connected, he brings them from overhead to rest by my sides as he slides down my body, planting kisses along the way. I purr as he works my anticipation to his advantage. My hips lever to meet him as he tilts me higher and rims my quivering lips.

"That's it, love," he groans. "You taste so sweet."

He licks and sucks at me vigorously before pulling away to blow cool air on my swollen lips. He kisses me there with slow, sweet laps of his tongue. Then suddenly he's nipping at my thighs with tiny bites followed by kisses to soothe his stings. As my core tightens, my hips buck gently in cadence against the intensity. I arch my back and try to shut my legs to ride out all he's making me feel.

"Open," he growls.

He rims my lips with his tongue before plunging a finger deeply inside of me, the slide eased by the slick, wet heat lubricating his path. The tender walls inside my core quiver in response, closing in tightly around the one, then two fingers working me towards my peak.

"I'm so close," I pant, shutting my eyes against the coming release. I bear down, more than ready for him to take me over the edge but then I miss the feel of him. My eyes fly open to find his swirling with need and lust.

"Not yet. Don't come yet."

"Mateo—" I whine.

He swats me gently between my legs, and I moan loudly, certain I'll come simply from the anticipation of coming. I need him to make contact soon, to fill this void he's left behind.

"It's not time to come yet. Let me love you, Lex."

He releases my hands, nudges my legs open wider, and plants his head between once more.

"Hold your legs just like that," he commands, and as I comply, I feel his tongue dive deeper inside me. A husky moan bubbles up from inside of me, answering the primal groans, grunts, praises, and curses he chants as he licks and laps at my clinching, dripping core. I release my legs and bear down once more, the pleasure sweet and nearly too much, but he's not having it.

He shakes his head in mock disdain as he hops from the bed and stands just out of my reach at the bedside to shed his boxer briefs. He strokes himself slowly and says, "Sit up, baby." When I do, he urges, "Scoot to the edge of the bed." I further comply.

"You have two rules. Tell me what they are."

His voice is rough and commanding. And I die.

MASKED INTENT

“Do as you say.”

“And the other?”

“No complaining.”

“Hmm. Have you followed your rules?”

“No.”

“Can you, Lex? Can you do what I say? And not complain?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my core spasming in near desperation as his desire spills over his mushroomed tip, making my mouth water and long to taste it.

“Good. Now focus.”

I’m not sure what he means for me to focus on at first, so I sit and watch him until my core contracts at the sight.

“Fuck,” he moans and closes his eyes as he strokes himself harder. When he stiffens in his hand, I want to beg him to let me feel him inside of me. My body feels compelled to feel this. His eyelids are heavy with desire as he steps closer to the bed and into me.

“Give me your mouth,” he says and winds my hair around his hand once more.

He tugs me closer as I slide forward to meet his request, and I follow his directions flawlessly. I sheath him with my lips and suck the full measure of him, from broad root to blunt, thick tip, tracing my tongue along the veins that stand in prominent relief along his shaft.

“That’s right. Just like that,” he praises as he works himself in and out of my mouth. “God,” he groans, “open up for me, baby.”

As I do, the low growl of his voice captures my senses, winding me up once more. My nipples tighten almost painfully, weighted by my lust and growing frustration. As he strokes through his climax, I pant to slow my heart rate and return my breathing to normal.

He motions to me with his free hand. “Scoot up on the bed. Now.”

As I turn and crawl up the bed, he crowds in behind me and swats my backside. “Ass up.”

He helps me find my way to my knees, pins my chest tightly to the bed with one hand, then enters me forcefully in one thrust. He

works his way down in my core while he grips my hips and moves me up and down his length, deliberately at first and teasingly slow until I push back, my body's plea for more. I tighten around his length as his body complies with the needs of mine, picking up the pace to soothe the aching urge he's built up inside me.

"God, yes," I purr as he continues working into me with agonizingly long, deep strokes that threaten to explode my insides and revector my world.

"Please, Mateo, don't stop."

He drives yet deeper then pulls all the way out. Over and over and over again, each time bringing me closer and closer to combustion. I groan and pant as he takes me higher and higher, shouting as muscles in my deepest, neediest places signal the impending climax. But again, he leaves me wanting, I realize, as the orgasm yet again eludes me. I cry out and turn to face him. He sits stroking himself, his face full of challenge.

"I was so close," I declare breathlessly, trying to keep the whine from bleeding into my voice.

"But it's not time for you to come, love." He tilts his head to the side. "Did I say come?"

That's when I see it. The smile I love best, the one that's vulnerable and tender, that invites me to feel alive in his love. And then it dawns on me. This may be a game of climax deprivation, but it's so much more. This is his way of prying me open and claiming my entire focus. Of claiming and soothing me. All of me. Until I pay attention to this lesson, until I let him have this piece of me, we can't move forward. I'm still working this out as I shake my head no and close my eyes.

"Stop thinking, Lex." He bends and bites a nipple. "Feel that?"

"Yes," I whisper-shout and settle deeper into the mattress as I yearn for him to fill me.

"Good," he purrs in my ear as he slips a finger inside of me. "Do you trust me, Lexi?" He asks simply, his voice raw with longing.

"More than anyone," I rasp. "Yes."

He gives me a curt nod. "Then, relax. Let me love you."

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He doesn't wait for my reply as he rocks himself into me, seating himself impossibly deep and lingering there. I open and our bodies take comfort here, our sighs and moans tangling in unison as I tighten around the thick, rigid column of flesh. "Oh, God," I cry out my bliss at the feel of him all around me. He snakes one hand between the bed and the small of my back, holding me in place while he reaches down with the other to urge one of my legs around his back. I manage to halt the knee-jerk desire to bring the other up as well and instead seek his eyes in question. His answering smile gives me the green light, so I wrap him up and shut my eyes.

"Open your eyes, Lex," he admonishes, slowing his pace and deepening his grind. "Let me see you."

His eyes are this dark, dreamy confection of gray and green but something new, too. Something I've never seen before that makes his irises appear to glow and melt me, and I can't look away. My heart flowers open and I'm electric sensation as he works into me, keeping me pinned to this moment in time, this place where he claims all of me. I slick all over him as he works that sweet, needy spot down deep, the sounds of our passion suctioning wetly with each stroke. But instead of chasing my orgasm, I chase this moment with him, losing myself completely to wherever this takes us. Tears begin streaming down my cheeks as my body delights in each sensation while my mind and heart surrender to his.

He dips his head to lick away the wetness, giving me yet more evidence of his devotion, his intention, and his determination to bear the brunt of my blows and to be the one who puts me together again when the cracks come into view. Our moans fill the room as our bodies and hearts find their rhythm. Too soon, he pulls out and moves to the headboard to prop himself to sitting before grabbing his shaft with one hand and reaching out to me with the other. I scramble to seat myself on his lap, feeling impatient and needy as he guides me down his length. As soon as I reach the base, he begins working up into me once more, the intense feelings made more urgent as our bodies fuse together and we each come undone.

"Baby come for me. Come now."

The look in his eyes and the stiffening between my legs commands my body to do as he asks, and I let go. My core wraps his entire length, snatching and grabbing, convulsing, and consuming him as I moan my release and prime his. He works himself up into me with a frenetic pace, his face etched with the evidence of his bliss, his passion a geyser oozing from my walls as I answer each of his thrusts with the urgent crush of my hips. We wring this moment and each other free from any version of us that suggests that I'm not his and he isn't mine, and I vine myself to him. He kisses my neck reverently, finally burying his head in the crook and nesting there. He breathes me in. I cling tighter to him and to this moment as fresh tears sheen my eyes and wet my cheeks. My tears flow freely as the echoes of my sorrow fade into the distance and joy and contentment wash over me, purging me of the day's poison and filling me with a hope and expectation that feels as surreal as it is new. Mateo pulls back and takes my face in his hands, wiping and kissing at my tears. It's more than the afterglow of great sex. The joy in his smile matches mine, and for the first time in my life, I know that this is what it's like to feel cherished and adored.

“No more doubts, Alexa.”

His entreaty triggers more tears as he gives me the affirmation that I need to feel this connection. To trust in it without question or fear of ulterior motives. I smile and relax into him, into wherever our hearts might lead us as we slide down the bed and settle in, eventually fading back to unconsciousness as he rocks me to sleep.

Wednesday, October 16

Alexa

I'm startled from my sleep a couple of hours later and find myself clinging to the remnants of coming dread conjured inside of my dreams. I lie still and will my pulse to settle, though at this point, I'm resigned to a night of fitful, broken rest. Rather than toss my way through the night, I untangle myself from my cozy cocoon beside Mateo, find and slip on my blouse, and quietly head to the kitchen and brew a cup of tea. While it steeps, I walk to a

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large window in the cavernous living room space and take a minute to study the view. Moonlight casts a dull glow over the quiet streets below, mostly deserted of cars at this hour. In the distance, a constellation of international corporate logos and rooftop lights outlines the epicenter of commerce, technology, and influence. I grew up in the area, so Washington, DC, has never been a tourist attraction to me. It was an annual field trip, and that was pretty much it. Over time, being part of the local fabric stripped much of the wonder from my reverence and regard for the place, leaving me with a high-definition lens that sees the many knicks and imperfections in the whole cloth of power, influence, and global domination. If I'm going to be awake, I decide to turn that lens inward.

I drag my resolve away from the window, grab my tea, and head back into the living room, where I park myself on the plush, beige chaise. I make myself go over the past day as part reminder, part intellectual inquiry to help make sense of what increasingly feels nonsensical. I smile at the memory of the sleepless nights spent in graduate school cutting my teeth on a craft devoted to exposing truth. Sage and I spent countless hours poring over notes and interviews to stitch together storylines as we developed our own unique approaches to news gathering and shared dreams of who we hoped to be. I've been trained to observe and ask questions to uncover what's real. So, perhaps if I tried viewing my life's latest oddities through a different lens, it might help me discern what my eyes can't. It might help make sense of Trent's reappearance after so many years with no contact. Or, maybe there's a solid clue or two to explain how anything he knows or has to say could ever influence Sam to such a point that he'd turn the threat against me? And what about Sam? Where the hell do we go from here?

I begin to scribble the thoughts as they come, making no attempt to give them any sense of organization. That comes later. In the meantime, I find a small slice of satisfaction knowing I'm not helpless in this, that there's power and comfort in searching for logic. I keep at this for pages, taking note of the big and the small, the clear and the ridiculous until my mind grows numb from exertion and exhaustion. I yield to these feelings and set my

brainstorming aside to settle into the pillow-soft cushions and the darkness as a deep, dream-free sleep relieves my busy mind.

Mateo

I'm disoriented when I wake up to the smell of Alexa's perfume on the empty sheets but no Alexa anywhere in sight. A quick look out the window tells me it can't be much past dawn, the dark gray of the night sky fading as the new day gets set to start. I shake off the concern and pull to my feet, find my shirt and boxers, and set out in search of Alexa. I find her curled up in our suite's living room. Discontent and agitation rest in the frown between her brows, her still-closed eyes moving rapidly beneath her lids. I run my hand lightly over the worried crease and hope that her subconscious mind will sense my presence and allow her to relax and recharge before she has to face whatever today brings.

Once I see the tension ease slightly, I find a place on the sofa beside her and start thinking through our next moves. That's when I notice a spread of papers covering the heavy oakwood coffee table. Each one is filled from top to bottom and marked in the margins with Alexa's thoughts. Her mind is on a mission to find answers, and it's fascinating to see where this map is leading. I can't tell whether she's wrapped her mind around a certain theory or if she's just allowing herself to free think, but it's evident that her notions have taken twists and turns around lots of interesting, viable corners.

As she begins to stir, I get up to give her the space to move around as she needs to and get comfortable, though I can tell she's anything but. She's not resting deeply at all, but she'll be down for a little longer if her quiet snoring is any indicator. I decide to use this time to put my own house in order so I can clear the decks to be with her.

First on the agenda is cancelling classes. I head back to the bedroom to grab my phone so I can tap out a broadcast message to my students advising them of their found time. Next, I contact my TAs so they can arrange to cover my planned office hours for the rest of the week, and I post several assignments to fill the void of my absence. I also send a quick text to Becket explaining what's

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up. He'll probably kick my ass for texting him before the sun is completely up in the sky, but whatever. Can't be helped.

With business out of the way, I pull into my jeans, stuff the phone into a back pocket, and head into the kitchen to grab some coffee. I'll need to get some things from my place, or maybe we should just go there instead. I don't know. I needed her to detach from everything last night. I needed her to know I'll lay down everything to be with her if she'll trust me. Now it's time to think about our next moves.

I find Alexa awake when I return to the living room. She swings her legs over the edge of the sofa and stretches the kinks from her limbs. Once I reach the sofa, I bend to kiss her forehead and take a seat beside her.

"How are you this morning, love?"

She frowns a little. "My head hurts." She laughs wryly. "Hell, my everything hurts, but I'll live." She glances at her notes on the table and then back to me, her look resigned and resolved. "I've got stuff to do."

"Yeah, I see you've been busy. Tell me what's going through your head."

"I'm not sure yet, but I know it starts with getting answers to some questions. I'd like to start with Sam." She closes her eyes a moment then continues. "I was so angry with him and focused on my own needs that I never found out what he wanted with me in the first place. It's odd, you know, because he's never beat around the bush with me in the past. I want to know why he did this time. Why he didn't make me listen to him."

"I can see why that would bother you after the fact," I say, "but maybe you concern yourself with that another time while we focus on keeping you safe."

"No. You don't understand. I can't just sit still and let this play out. And I can't stay away from my children while it does! A night is one thing, but—"

She stops speaking and dials down her emotions and the frustration from her helpless feelings. She angles herself towards me and pleads her case, her eyes clear with her conviction.

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“You saw my notes. I need to know what Sam wanted to talk about. I honestly feel like that will give me some clue to what’s behind all this. Or if nothing else, maybe he knows what’s up with Trent. Beyond my intuition, I can’t tell you why I think that. But I do.”

“Ok. You seem convicted, and that’s enough for me,” I say, though I’m not sure I share her view. “Let’s go see the man.”

“I think it’s probably better if I go alone.”

“Not happening. I’ll take you to him. I know how to make myself scarce when the time comes, but I’m not letting you out of my sight otherwise. So, get dressed, and we can go. On the ride there, we’ll talk about how to keep you and the boys together and safe.”

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Alexa

Nearly an hour passes before I'm dressed and at the dining room table situated on the other side of the living room. Though I can't make out the words, the distinct rise and fall of Mateo's voice in the other room carries enough hints to tell me he's having a contentious encounter with whomever is on the other end. I stare at the haphazardly arranged notes on the table before me and sigh as I shift my gaze from my phone to my scribble of thoughts.

It starts with picking up the phone and making my appeal to Sam. I could call his cell, but after the way things ended yesterday, it feels a bit wrong to be that familiar so soon. I scroll through my contacts, dial his office number, and draw in a deep breath as the line rings. When his assistant picks up after the third ring, I'm shocked to find out he's taken an indefinite leave of absence effective immediately. I can't learn much else, though, except he seemed harried and unusually agitated when he stopped in to clear his desk, tell his clients of his decision, and make plans to hand off his accounts. I hear the concern in Jessica's voice, which intensifies my own over news of his odd behavior and hasty departure. I thank her and dial his cell, which goes directly to voice mail.

That settles it. I need to get to Sam's house.



It feels eerie to be here again. The sprawling river birch tree in front of the house now completely shades Sam's front yard and makes the New England style cottage home look like a true Victorian relic. I sit and study the house as my mind relives the highlights of that last talk with Didiane and the stubborn defiance Sam displayed when he overheard us talking. I shove the memories aside and reach for the door handle, but Mateo stops me before I can exit the car.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah," I answer, the one syllable drawn out and morphed into a sigh. "I'm ready."

I nod once, more for my own benefit than anything else as I toss him a quick smile and open my door. He follows me from the

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car and up the long front walkway to the side-door entrance that friends and frequent guests of the Stone family know to use. I ring the bell and wait, and when there's no answer, I look around for signs of activity. Having watched his home on occasion during his travels, I look around for clues that might help me to know whether I've missed him. I climb the three steps that walk up from the sidewalk to the driveway and peer inside his garage to find his cars in place. During his travels, Sam leaves a lockbox at the left of one garage door and places a key inside for my use. I'm encouraged when I can't find the box anywhere, renewing my hope that he's nearby. I take a deep breath as I walk to Didiane's rose garden, today as alive and vibrant as the last time I stood here, and I'm floored as I take in the sight. I never knew Sam to take an interest in anything even remotely related to rose gardening, but I guess this is his monument to his life with his wife.

"What? Is something the matter, Lexi?" Mateo asks, concern clouding his eyes.

I shake my head. "No. It's just, well, it's this place. This was Didi's space. Not Sam's. I guess I'm just surprised to find it here," I say simply, "and like this. Still alive and well tended."

That's when my ears pick up the faint sounds of music. Steady bass. Driving drums. And it hits me. Sam's in his basement art studio. I motion for Mateo to follow me down the steps towards the subterranean space. The sliding glass door is partially ajar, allowing each mournful wail of Stevie Nicks' voice to pierce the air around us.

You can't fix this. You lost a friend.

I smile, but it's sad as I consider how appropriate the song is for this moment between us. I don't know if that's his mood, but it's certainly mine as I motion for Mateo to follow me as I take this familiar trek to the deep recess that Sam uses when he sculpts. The music grows louder as I near the entrance to his studio.

Friendships break like glass. Kind of like my heart, I muse, but there's no time for emotions. Not right now. As I near his studio door, he picks up his phone, and the music immediately grows softer.

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“Might have been better if you’d called first,” he says, his back still to me.

“I did. But you’re not answering your phone.”

He turns slowly but his face gives away little. “There’s a message in there somewhere then.”

I walk through the door towards the spot where he’s rooted himself. His eyes are distant and sad. He reeks of expensive whiskey and sweat, and his hair is tousled with glints of the metal flake he must have been using on the non-descript structure in process.

“Yes, perhaps. But we need to talk, Sam.”

He looks to the ground and spins away from me. “I think you said enough yesterday. Let’s leave it there.”

I walk around to eye his artwork and to recapture his attention. “That’s not what I want to talk about. Not really.”

He narrows his eyes, his suspicion and defensiveness shielding this emotional version of the man I thought I knew.

“Then what can I do for you, Alexa? Say what you need.”

I smile sadly at his venom, his hurt and anger interlaced with each bitter word.

“You wanted to tell me something, but I never let you get it out,” I answer simply, pausing to close my eyes as I scoop up the resolve that I need to walk through this door. “I’ve been so focused on my agenda that it’s only now occurred to me that you’ve never said what was so urgent.”

He curls his lip in distaste. “What difference does that make to you now?”

“In truth, I don’t know. What I know is that someone vandalized Mateo’s car at my house the day I quit the firm, and yesterday, my life was threatened. That may have nothing at all to do with you. But my intuition tells me that I need to know what you know, and that once I do, I may have some of the answers that I need.”

“So, not only am I shit human being, now I’m a vandal and stalker, too?”

“No. That’s not at all my point. But my gut tells me that you’re the starting point. That talking with you might give me the insights I need to keep myself and my family safe.”

For the first time, Sam looks past me to Mateo then back to me.

“Dr. Da Rocha,” he drawls, “what’s your part in all this?”

Mateo steps in front of me and places himself as a shield between me and Sam’s churlish affect.

“I’m here to give her whatever she needs. To protect her, and if necessary, to get her out of here if you’re not ready or able to be civil to her.” He squares his shoulders and gives him what-the-fuck arms. “Your call, Stone.”

Sam seems to shrink under Mateo’s scrutiny, and if I hadn’t been watching him closely, I’d have missed his nearly imperceptible nod.

“I’ll give you two some privacy then,” Mateo says. He turns around to look at me and places a soft kiss on my temple. “I’ll be outside in the garden. Let me know if you need anything.”

He turns back to Sam, and I guess when he sees what he needs to, he turns to leave us alone. Once Mateo is gone and safely out of earshot, Sam motions to one of the metal stools beside his sculpting station.

“Have a seat. You need to know some history first.”

I move to the proffered stool and begin to listen to his story.

During the Great Recession in the late 2000s, Storey|Fischer|Stone fell into financial difficulty. This wasn’t unexpected, but it wasn’t timely considering the trio’s coming plans for early retirement. That’s when Dick Storey proposed a way for the firm to have a new and highly lucrative stream of income. The Hedgepeth Companies found itself bound tightly by regulatory red-tape and bleeding cash, and its leadership decided that HedgeCo needed a brighter, bolder image and a publicist with gravitas and a bullhorn loud enough to be heard and heeded. It took some doing, but Dick convinced Sam and Davis to take on Hedge and his company, immediately changing S|F|S’ fortunes. What was envisioned to be a one-time engagement became an

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anchor client relationship, shocking most PR insiders. Though S|F|S was known to take on some of the more difficult and controversial clients, none had been quite as irreverent or detestable as Hedge.

Realizing the court of public opinion wasn't likely to rule in his favor and that S|F|S might end their relationship as a result, Hedge did his homework to find any leverage he could use to keep the firm on his payroll. The knowledge came in handy when the partners, predictably, tried to resign as agency of record after about six months. In response, Hedge made a pitch the trio couldn't refuse. S|F|S would continue to represent him, and he'd remain quiet about Davis' insider trading gains and Dick's fondness for escorts and senators' wives. To sweeten the deal, he doubled the monthly retainer and paid the firm bonuses for each thwarted story or accusation it quashed on his behalf. The enhanced monthly receipts not only benefited S|F|S, but the move also allowed HedgeCo to hide the origin of a significant portion of its R&D funds, courtesy NGOs connected to foreign governments.

"Though it had never been Dick's intent, that's how we found ourselves cleaning money for HedgeCo. In return, the firm received a sizable take of the pass through, and over time, the financial gains became insane, and we were exceeding our retirement dreams."

He shrugs and gives me a small smile as he shifts in his seat considering his next words.

"Over time, our lie became the truth we chose to believe. Especially when it brought more and higher profile business our way. We sat Jackson at the center of every transaction to ensure the optics didn't raise suspicion, which wasn't hard since we're a private firm exempt from having to make public financial disclosures."

His eyes hold an interesting mix of sincerity and arrogance as he runs this down for me, and though he may be trying to diminish it, he's enjoying the memories he unearths on this walk down a crooked lane.

"Each time we brought in new people," he goes on, "it was understood that Hedge was a marquis client whom we protected

at all costs. I can't tell you what Davis or Dick might have done or said on Hedge's behalf with any certainty," he hedges, "but *I* never lied for the man. Neither did anyone who ever worked on my teams."

I dissect his words with the sharpest of scalpels to find the source of the disappointment and suspicion that I'll tamp down until I understand more. He's trying to control how I think about this through his messaging, but I can't and won't be spun. I give him a small nod but, apparently, that's not the response he's after. His lips close to that familiar thin line that telegraphs his frustration and irritation as I sit across the sculpting table, my expression neutral.

"Anyway," he continues after the awkward pause, "Davis was content to hold things down and handle Hedge. I started writing and was able to use my books as a way to disconnect from the day-to-day by accepting speaking invitations at conferences and universities around the country. That's also when I took up sculpting. Something I always wanted to do when I was young but didn't have the courage to lean into it all the way."

"Was art one of the points of connection you had with Magda?"

He nods slowly, sadly. "Yes. Artist's souls and all that."

His memories must take him to a place of great wistfulness if the softened lines and the faraway look in his eyes are any indicator. I feel sorry for Didiane as I experience this involuntary transformation, this telltale evidence of his heart's yearnings. But I can't be bothered to conjure sympathy for him – not now anyway. We need to stay on task, so I keep my thoughts my own.

"So, then, time passed, and we simply settled into the business arrangement. Davis played attack dog for Hedge. Hedge paid us for mounting a good defense. Then Sydell took over. You know she doesn't have the chops for the job, but Hedge never complained because he was happy to have dates with attractive women replace the headlines he wanted to bury.

"When Davis and Dick gave Sydell the reigns, well, that's when the governor came off. Staff attrition skyrocketed. Headlines got

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seedy. Fuck, the quality of our clients declined. They had the money. But they were truly lowlife scum.”

“And yet?”

“Yes, Alexa. And yet, I represented them. It’s business,” he says with a shrug. “And like I said,” he swallows hard and shoots a dead stare my way, “if this is going to get contentious, then maybe we continue this some other time.”

“No, Sam. I’m not here to judge. I want to understand. Not even the why. At least not now. I need to know the what. Specifically, what did I have to do with any of this?”

Obviously grateful for the redirect, he relaxes his defensive posture slightly.

“That’s when I asked you to join. I thought maybe you could intercept her efforts and put the firm’s reputation back on the right path for the right reasons. I also thought I might be able to drive Sydell out and make Hedge fire us by threatening them with your skills, prowess and integrity.”

“You couldn’t tell me that?”

“I didn’t see the need.”

“So, you used me.”

“If you need to look at it that way, I guess that’s accurate.”

I’ll give him his props for shooting straight from the first, even if his honesty chafes. I push this down along with the growing list of odd statements and bruised feelings I’ve set aside throughout this conversation. It’s time to get to why I came here.

“I need the truth, Sam. What did you hope to gain in bringing me on board?”

“I know you, Alexa. I know you wouldn’t suffer Hedge’s attitude or behavior. I also knew you wouldn’t take his shit or Sydell’s for that matter. You’re a purist. You play it straight, and you’re damned good at what you do. I knew I could use that to get under his skin.

“And it worked at first,” he adds quickly and with a burst of pride that probably shouldn’t be on display. “You intrigued him, which pissed Sydell off. But he got scared and demanded Sydell reign you in when he realized you weren’t just a challenge but a formidable foe.”

“So, you launch a power play to put me in the lead to try and block Hedge. Bet that went over well with your partners,” I fill in as I cling desperately to civility.

“It did once I explained my angle. I thought he’d fire us if he couldn’t get *carte-blanche* services any longer. So, I convinced Davis and Dick that we’d be worse off leaving Sydell in charge. That you could rebuild us better than ever.”

“Why didn’t you think I needed to know that?”

“I thought some plausible deniability on your part might be in order. But Lexi, once I realized that things were different, I did try to tell you. That day I came to see you at home.”

“But as you say, that’s only because you realized things weren’t going as you’d hoped. Something went south and made you revise your plans.”

His face is sad, his eyes haunted. “It was Trent. I hadn’t counted on his involvement. I certainly hadn’t counted on having him demand yours.”

“Why me? Trent never took an interest in me or my work while we were married. Why should I believe he’s suddenly a fan?”

“He’s desperate and doesn’t have any other choices, Alexa. His pockets aren’t deep enough to engage other firms. And he was fully aware of our relationship with Hedge, who, along with Trent’s business partner, are pressuring him to make sure their venture takes off and succeeds. To do that, he needs funding, and he needs a solid brand. He has neither. Hedge and Sydell believed that positive press about the SelmaTec venture would neutralize any negative issues that might threaten the company’s success. You unwittingly played into their plans by removing yourself from the vetting process for SelmaTec. Hedge thought that meant he’d get his way. What he didn’t count on was Trent going off the rails when he heard you wouldn’t represent them. Seems Trent thought he could bully and intimidate you into crafting the image he wanted and threatened to pull out of the project when he learned you wouldn’t take the account. He thought he could make a direct appeal to you and never thought you’d say no. When you did, he took a different tack.”

“Which was?”

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“Pressuring and ultimately threatening me if I didn’t bring you back to the firm.”

“Or what?”

“Or he’d tell Hedge and the media that I slept with a minor and that the minor was your mother.”

Sam considers me more closely, hesitating before pressing on. He looks to the floor again, expels a harsh breath, and I’m not prepared for what he says next.

“And if you continued to refuse him after that, he said he’d petition the court to reinstate his parental rights.”

I curse at his words but force myself to remain calm at his revelation.

“Explains why you came at me as you did,” I say, forcing myself to focus solely on Trent’s threat against Sam.

“It doesn’t. There’s not much excuse for that. I was in the early stages of panic. That’s not an excuse.”

“So what now?” I press. “What about Hedge and his dirty money?”

“Don’t care anymore. But you should know that Trent made good on at least a part of his threat. Hedge knows my secrets and has raised the stakes. I’d always assumed my dirty laundry would be safe from him. But I was wrong. Hedge played that trump with me a few days after the *Post* article appeared. He called to talk, pedo to pedo, he said, and to remind me of what’s at stake. He’s threatened to expose me if I don’t step in and put things back to right.”

“Which means what?”

“Either bring you back or handle things myself.”

“And your plan?”

“I’m on a leave of absence.”

“You do know that burying your head in the sand won’t help you fix this.”

“No, but you’ve taught me a tough lesson on the importance of following the convictions of your heart. I don’t have to do anything just yet. But I’m not going to allow him to ruin my reputation without fighting back either. I have some thoughts, and I’ll know what to do when the time comes.”

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We sit in silence for a few minutes before Sam rises from his stool and walks to a corner of his studio. He retrieves a welder's helmet, gloves, and a wire brush, places them on a worktable adjacent to his project and then returns his attention to me.

"You said something about death threats. I can't see how any of what I've told you relates to your situation."

"I'm not certain yet either. I'm following where the story leads, relying on instinct, I guess." I shrug away the self-doubt trying to color my confidence. "All I know is that for the first time in my life, I'm content with who I am and won't let anything take that from me. I've done nothing to make myself a target of any type of threat. Part of me thinks this is just one huge prank, and though I won't take it lightly, I won't fold to it either."

"I know you won't, Lexi dear," he says, his voice low and ragged with unexpressed emotion. "But I hope you keep your Dr. Da Rocha close." He studies me, maybe debating whether to say what he wants to. "Sometimes we can't see what's in front of us with our own eyes. We're too close to catch the clearest view. That's when you need someone to watch your back the most."

I nod, and we sit quietly for a moment, each of us digesting the past few minutes. As I do, I shift my focus to the mishmash of metal and bolts between us.

"What is it?" I deflect, pointing to his artwork, "Your sculpture."

"I'm still figuring that out. I have a few ideas, but let's see how things take shape."

His smile is genuine and open. I want to return it, but I can't see past the sadness it evokes. This is a tragic irony. I'm sure the contortion of expressions on my face that passes for a smile is reminder enough of the mixed-up state of our relationship. So, I stand to leave, needing to choke down what I've learned.

"Thanks, Sam. I appreciate your time."

He nods before reaching for his welder's helmet. "Take care of yourself, Alexa."

"You too, Sam."

MASKED INTENT

I give Mateo my download as we head to his condo. I try to visualize my thoughts as I recount my time with Sam. But it's more than a struggle to sort my emotional anxiety over our blowout from the shock over his revelations about the depth of his relationship with Hedge. But I somehow manage to do exactly that, thinking aloud and placing into neat, deliberate order each idea that leads me back to the thing that's becoming my central hypothesis: Trent and SelmaTec, in part or whole, connect with or play some part in the threats that have crossed my path over the past days.

"But why bring your sons into this?" Mateo asks after hearing my manic retelling of my time with Sam.

"I think he expected something or someone very different when we talked at the firm. When he saw he held no sway with me, he probably decided legal action was his only leverage."

Mateo sighs and turns away slightly. When he looks at me again, he doesn't hide his concern and frustration. Yet, his voice is gentle and soothing.

"All you've told me about Caverton would sound curious under the best circumstances. But the more I learn," he stops himself and shakes his head, "I don't know, Lex. You can get mad with me if you need to, but I need you to tell me that he's not next on your list of people to sit down with."

He knows me well, this man that I'm growing to adore. I swing myself around and grab his arm. I need him to understand why I can't ignore Trent any longer. Why talking to him is the only way to solve this riddle.

"I can't avoid it anymore, Mateo. How can I not compare this to the situation with Sam? I might have made some different decisions if I'd had all the facts. Maybe if I talk to Trent, it might defuse things."

He gives me the side eye and shakes his head.

"Think about it, Mateo. He's the logical and common link to these threats. It's time to understand why."

Mateo smiles, but there's no amusement in his eyes.

"I get your point, and I feel your conviction, love. But tell me. How can you know you'll be safe with him?"

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He leans away and crosses his arms, a rare passive aggression coming from him, and I mark it. His eyes flash with fury and frustration as he fights to reign himself in. It's time to give him what reassurances I can and maybe find a few concessions, too.

"Let's talk about that." And that's not at all what he's expecting me to say given the shocked expression on his face, which I answer with an amused smile.

"I don't think it's the best idea to have you with me, but maybe if I set up a time to talk with Trent someplace public, that might answer the question of safety. And maybe you could have someone drive me there and back."

By the time I've tossed out my suggestion, he's closed most of the space between us. As he brings his forehead to mine, he huffs softly and reaches up to grab my face.

"I still don't like it."

He pulls away and kisses my cheek. I reach for his cheek and cup it in my hand. "I don't either. But that's why I'll be doing my homework before we have our chat."

I take the next few minutes to share my plans to leverage one of the forensic accountants I worked with during my life as a news producer. I'd built an extensive list of outside consultants, each subject experts in their respective industries, to enhance or confirm our reporting. The assortment of trivia and obscurities I learned thanks to forging these ties is obscenely broad and might make me a serious contender on Jeopardy! one day. Today's mission, though, is to recall the secrets that can often be unlocked with a close review of a balance sheet. Sam mentioned that SelmaTec's funding was lacking, so finding out just how lacking his coffers are is job one. If he's not well capitalized, that might explain his extreme interest in image management – and by association me – all of a sudden. It's a possible storyline, but I won't know for sure until we look at the financials.

Mateo thoughtfully hears me out, clearly processing each rationale I present, weighing it carefully against his growing sense of dread.

"If I'm hearing you, though, you're not planning to confront him until you have someone dig up his financial dirt, am I right?"

MASKED INTENT

“I’m not looking for dirt,” I protest, “I’m looking for whatever truth he doesn’t want me to know. That way, I have leverage of my own against his planned threat. Think about it. This way, he can’t get off any of his lies. Look, the man hasn’t so much as sent a holiday card since we divorced. He doesn’t want anything to do with the boys. Just like always, this is solely about him and what he thinks I can do for him but refuse to.”

“And that sounds a lot like ego to me, love. It’s what men are made of. It’s what makes men do some of the stupid shit we do. I’ll go along for now, ok? But let’s just agree that we’ll have a plan for when you meet with him.”

“Ok. A plan it is.”

Chapter 30

Mateo

You can't plan for crazy, and that's precisely what I think of Trent Caverton and his behavior. Alexa's not the only one with resources, though, so I decide to put mine to use as well once we've returned to the Ritz. I packed a bag to last me through the weekend and put my building attendant on notice to keep eyes on my place while I'm away. That frees me to figure out how best to keep this woman safe while we figure out how to return her to her life.

Alexa and the boys had agreed to FaceTime once the kids were all home from school, which should be soon. Phaedra has taken leave for the rest of the week, so she and Alexa have been in touch regularly by text with Phaedra providing updates and reassurances any time Alexa started to feel shaky. I've had my questions about their relationship, but for whatever else she might be, Phaedra has been the perfect bridge and a most faithful but forceful steward of Alexa's wily boys. I hear the women catching up, Alexa consumed by her worry and guilt over spending another night away from her clan, so I take these moments to put my feelers out and gather some insights into her ex.

MASKED INTENT

You can tell a lot about a person based on the company they keep. I think about the irony in that as I decide to reach out to my buddy Dez, a really great private cop with a really bad drinking problem. Don't get me wrong. He's not the type of drunk who stumbles around insulting people and collecting DUIs. His is a more evolved alcoholism. Artful even. He's so lost in the bottle that he's learned to mask his drunkenness. Unless you know the man well, you wouldn't think he was wasted. He's fun. He's outgoing. But he can also be a dick. I get that he carries around a load of worry, guilt, and regrets that he can't seem to outrun. But that makes it tough for him to work for others, or sometimes be around people generally, which is why he finds himself alone in making his living. Alone much of the time. He's tried but failed to partner with other investigative minds to get his business off the ground more quickly, but each time, the story's the same. Dez is a crazy, quasi-sociopathic ass. Thank you, next.

After explaining what I need to Dez, he says he'll get back to me once he has a line on where Trent might be right now. Then, to cover all my bases, I reach out to Lt. Tomlin to see whether he can learn anything more about the mad scientist, his reclusive business partner, and what the hell they want with Alexa. I leave a voice mail asking him to return my call before checking my own missed messages. I have two texts from Emery and a call from Antonio.

Emery: Beecher's such a bore! Come with me to his reception tomorrow, sugar. Make it tolerable? It'll be more than worth it. Xoxo

And her second message: ***Don't make me beg, sugar.***

I delete the messages and block Emery, though I know keeping her out of my cyber life won't ease her grip on the reality she's trying to force. It's just a loose firewall between us until I can crush her obsession for good. To do that, I'll need to call off Antonio and Ellison, and that needs to happen in person. When Antonio's line goes to voice mail, I let my anger set the tone as I give him the heads up that I'll be stopping by to clear his confusion soon. Almost as soon as I disconnect the one call, my phone alerts me

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to the next: Lt. Tomlin. We exchange pleasantries briefly before he gives me the latest.

“We’ve brought the Conway boy in, gonna ask him some questions and see if he’ll cop to anything,” Tomlin explains.

He says that the boy apparently had someone deliver an envelope to Alexa’s doorstep this afternoon. As soon as the boy completed the drop, Tomlin’s deputy on patrol grabbed up the kid and the envelope. Today’s delivery was intended for the boys. Pictured as the three little pigs, the photo was a grotesque suggestion of their death, each pig’s eyes gashed through, and each coated with globs of red sharpie intentionally bled through the page to simulate blood stains. Unlike yesterday’s delivery for Alexa, today’s drop off was a regular sized white envelope lacking handwriting. Tomlin goes on to explain that the delivery kid admitted that Thad had paid him in weed to leave the envelope by Alexa’s door.

They haven’t started questioning Conway yet, so I tell Tomlin to keep me posted and we say our goodbyes. Until I know more, I don’t want Alexa to worry over this. At the same time, I know keeping this news from her isn’t smart either. I’m apparently guided by one of my better angels, who leads me to the only sensible answer when I hear Alexa’s voice lilting in the distance as I make my way back towards the living room. Her joy is sweet and undeniable as she and her sons chop it up, laughing, swapping stories, and talking all around the reason for their forced separation. You’d think they’d been apart for a year instead of a day as their voices collide, sharing tales of their school days, how they were loving Phaedra, and how cool it was to hang out at Luke’s. Hearing their shared compassion and concern compels me to do what I can to erase any threats and return their lives to normal. I know it won’t be that simple. But it begins with keeping her informed about everything, the good and the bad. I sit on the sofa and slouch into the cushions before throwing my head back and closing my eyes against the headache I’ve been trying to push away for hours. Between the broken sleep, worry, lack of food, and irritation over whatever Antonio is trying to cook up this time, I’ve collected but kept at bay a heaping dose of stress and anxiety.

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As I sit here going through what's still to be done, the pain starts to settle in, taking up residence at my temples, where it begins beating rhythmically and insistently. I reach up to rub at the vice grips trying to lay siege to my peace and muddy my thoughts, massaging small, firm circles to calm the tension down long enough to think through our next moves. I need to find a safe place where she and the boys can ride things out until we know who's behind the threats. I need Emery to leave me the hell alone. And I need my uncle out of my life. An interesting solution begins to take form as I feel my breathing slow and my limbs sink deeper into the sofa. I let the hope I feel lighten my spirits and sail me into a dark, dreamless sleep.

When I wake up again, it's dark outside, but I hear Alexa's voice faintly from somewhere in the near distance. My brain and body battle for dominance as I try to decide to get up. The dull ache that began in my head has now fully gripped my neck and back, so I know it'll take a few minutes to get the blood flowing again. To get me going again. I sit up and begin to knead at my neck, pulling and poking at the sore tissues knotting and throbbing down the length of the column. I hit a particularly effective spot and wince at the pain of the release. I continue working a few especially nasty trigger points until I'm feeling less bound by the hazards of falling asleep sitting on a sofa.

After standing to stretch, I follow the sound of her voice to the bedroom, where she's banging away on her computer and speaking with someone on the phone. She looks up with a smile, holds up a finger in acknowledgement, and points to a chair just across the room for me to sit. I wave her off and let her know it's fine as I fall back into one, taking the time to check my messages. I'm reminded of the first thing I need to do when I see the message from Tomlin. He's placed a patrol car at Lindy's house even though the sheriff's department had no reason to believe that Thad knew where the Wilson boys were staying. He stresses that it's just a safety precaution, but something tells me otherwise. That there's more.

I scroll through to see another text and curse.

Antonio: Whatever you have to say can keep until I see you at Beecher's Friday night.

It's Antonio's answer to my request for some of his time. Fine, old man, I'll play by your rules. What could have been handled in private will most certainly become a reality show if I know my uncle. But if that's how this goes, then that's how this goes. Beecher's house may be just the place to finally teach him his when it comes to my life and my decisions.

I bring my focus back to Alexa and to the news I need to share. It sounds like her call is coming to an end, so I decide it's time I braced myself for her likely reaction. I try to get a read on her mood, but she's all business right now. I'll leave her to it while I figure out what I can do to help hold her together. I stand up and motion to the dining room. She nods as I move out of the bedroom and find my way to one of the many large windows in this place.

As I study the view, I take in a few breaths to release some of the aggravation and tension growing in my gut. It's a little past 10 and the streets below are mostly free from steady traffic. The few cars rolling past coast with precision along the various economically lit twists and turns, suggesting an intimacy between road and driver that only comes with regular use. Each day, hired vehicles just like these shuttle around the men and women who make the deals that attract and inject large investments of cash and opportunity into the region. People don't stop to consider that black-car drivers often sit at the heartbeat of these transactions. While traveling from meeting to meeting to meals to conferences and black-tie affairs, their proximity to power players gives them a direct wire into some of the barest moments and most vulnerable fissures in their passengers and the organizations they lead. This is how to find out more, I think aloud. I'll need to talk this through with Bryan first, but I'm thinking that *Arrive in Style* just found a new potential client in Trent Caverton.

I back away from the window and sink into a nearby lounge chair as I think this through some more. I'm not typically one to plot and scheme. I like my answers and actions to be straightforward. I guess that's why this feels a lot like trying to walk

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quickly through peanut butter. You can do it. But the time it takes to figure out the best approach would be better spent doing things you know you can ace without stepping outside yourself.

“You seem lost right now.”

Alexa’s voice returns me to now, giving me a welcome refresh from these last few minutes of self-assessment. I let her see my worry, my contemplation, and my regret. I hate that shadows from our pasts cast themselves long all around us, continuing to cloud our lives just as we’re getting to a point of trust in our relationship. I take a few steps to meet her where she stands and reach for her waist. I just want to lose myself in her smell and enjoy the way she feels in my arms, the way she makes me feel when I’m holding her before I have to shake her up.

“There’s a few things going on right now,” I answer as wryly as I can manage and bend my head to kiss her neck. She sighs and laughs lightly before sinking her head into my shoulder.

“It would be nice to get off this merry-go-round for a bit.”

Her voice is soft and sad, and I hate that I’m about to make things even worse. But it can’t be helped.

“Yes, love, I want that, too.” I reach up and stroke one of her cheeks. “Come and sit with me for a minute.”

I don’t wait for a response but instead grab her hand, walk us to the chaise, and pull her down on my lap.

“Ok. Something’s wrong. What’s wrong now, Mateo?”

Her energy matches mine. It’s urgent and edgy, so I hold her more tightly to try and ground us both. I close my eyes and steel myself to keep her rooted. I tell her first that Thad is being held and why. I assure her that her boys are being protected. Her stare is blank the entire time that I’m talking, so I can’t be sure she’s heard me. She could have checked out, or maybe she’s in shock. When she finally looks at me again, she seems calm, determined, singular of mind.

“Tris is an office aid at his school during study hall,” she offers absently. “He said his counselor mentioned that someone had been at their school looking for a TJ Caverton today. His counselor is one of the handful of people who knows about his name change.”

“Did his counselor tell him who it was?”

“A teenager,” she answers before hopping from my lap despite my attempts to keep her glued to me. She starts to pace the room.

“Boy wouldn’t give a name and had to be threatened with arrest before he’d leave the campus. And it’s truly weird, you know? It’s not like Tris’ name change was a secret, but it wasn’t big news either. Kids reveal their pronouns with regularity, so changing a name hardly seems like it would grab headlines. Why would anyone turn up asking for him by that name almost four years later? What could that boy possibly want with Tristan?”

Her thoughts are fired in streams with no certain, singular focus in her quest to find what makes sense. I rise and walk to her to block her path, then I reach for her hand and grab it tight.

“I don’t know, sweetheart, but I do know that your boys are all safe. There’s a patrol car outside Lindy’s house, and it’ll be there all night.” I kiss her on the forehead. “And I think that if we want to be sure that we keep them safe, maybe think about keeping them from school for a little while.”

“Yes. Done.” Her face brightens slightly and she nods. “Let’s do that.”

“Good. And we’ll wait to see what Tomlin comes back to us with once he’s had a chance to talk with Thad.”

“Why is this happening, Mateo? What did I do?”

Her tears fall against her will, spilling her fears and frustrations and cracking my heart open alongside hers.

“Nothing.” I pull back to look at her, force her to see me. “You did nothing, love. You’re not responsible for what other people do.”

“Apparently, I am. I’ve done something to this Conway child. At least in his mind.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t control his thoughts. And whatever his justification, it won’t be rational, so I won’t let you feel guilty over this.”

“I’m not worried for myself, Mateo!”

“Shhh. I know, love. I know. I rock her in my arms. I’ve got you. I’ve got the boys.” I pull back and hope she sees that I mean

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this with every piece of my soul. “I won’t let anything happen to any of you. Ever. Trust me.”

Several hours later once Alexa’s resting soundly, my own messes keep my thoughts active and make me restless. I just hung up from my mother and deleted four voice messages from Emery, and I need some time to digest all this. I’ve always taken Emery’s obsession as evidence of her entitlement. She’s always gotten what she wanted, so in her mind, I should be no exception. I’m immune to her con, and I’ve told her this. I’ve let my distance speak for me. But something’s changed with her. There’s a desperation that creates static when she’s near.

After my exhausting talk with my mom, I have a better idea of what’s powering her sudden pursuit. If I’m right, then maybe by cutting off what’s encouraging her, she’ll realize that I’ve released myself from her and any influence she could hope to have for good. I’m thinking it couldn’t hurt to show her where my heart is either. Emery needs to see me with Alexa, see the way we are together. If she can’t bring herself to believe my words, then maybe she’ll believe what anyone with eyes can see.

Like always, I find myself in awe of my mother and her insights. I also need to come up with some way to apologize for my attitude with her earlier. I never enjoy being aggressive with my mother, but I knew it was the only way she’d tell me what I needed to know about Antonio. Now that I do, I can’t say that I’m surprised. But I am furious that he’d try to hook into my life to preserve his status and standing, especially when his situation is one of his own creation. So was my mother, who had no idea how badly my relationship with her brother has deteriorated. She said all the obligatory sibling things, but I’m unmoved. He may have had a tough life. He may have had to scrap to get to where he’s gotten. He may have helped me escape my own potentially bad ending. But that doesn’t give him the right to force me into a different type of servitude. I’ve allowed him to use my gratitude to him to his benefit for long enough. I draw the line at financing his bad choices. Those aren’t mine to fix. Not to the depth and extent he must require if all my mother says is true.

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I find myself walking the suite from room to room trying to work all this out in my mind until the walls feel like they're closing in on me. So, I change into workout gear, grab my phone and key card, and head to the fitness center to work off the tension keeping peaceful sleep at bay.

I have the run of the facility, which probably has something to do with the fact that it's a little past 1 a.m. I decide to pour my anger into the weight circuit, alternating with a couple of tread mill runs to keep up my heart rate and encourage exhaustion. I'm at it for about 45 minutes before it does the trick and welcome the calm as I resolve to do what I have to do. I head back to the suite to shower and grab a few hours of sleep because I have a busy day ahead. By the time I see Antonio Friday evening, I'll have a good start on the process of dismantling the things that keep us bound. When I let him know that I know his story, when I tell him about what I've done, that's certain to undo any ties that might remain between us.

Chapter 31

Thursday, October 17

Alexa

I'm realizing some unfortunate truths about being in a relationship with a man who earned his doctorate in how the mind works and why. Concerned over my emotional well-being, Mateo's been hovering in the ether, texting me consistently throughout the day. I've sensed he's under some pressures of his own, but he's dodged my direct questions ever since we got up this morning. He was dressed and gone before nine, saying only that he had to get a handle on some things at work and with his uncle. All I know is that he's decided to take a sabbatical and wants to begin putting his plans in order. I know, too, that his uncle isn't likely to support the idea, though I can't begin to understand why. When I asked him about it, Mateo was dodgy with his answers, and that worries me. All he said was that he needed to get his uncle on the right page, but that I shouldn't worry because he had it all under control. He didn't want me to pick up more than I already have on my plate. That's a perfectly acceptable explanation. It's also an odd one given our history. But I won't press. Not yet anyway. He'll tell me when it's time.

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I return my attention to the bowl of fruit and yogurt I've been nursing at this larger-than-life dining room table for the last half hour. As nice as this place is, I'm growing tired of living in a cavern and hiding away from the world. Of course, my kids couldn't be happier about having to stay away from school, but I'm not enjoying my found time in any way. I've worried, cried, and agonized more in the past two days than I have at any point in my life. For someone who doesn't like to tread in deep, emotional waters, this makes me feel as though my drowning is imminent, and that's unacceptable. I bang my hand on the table, more than irritated at the way this day is unfolding. Just as my pity party heats up, my phone begins ringing. I curse softly at first until I see who's calling. I happily swipe to meet Treat's smiling face.

"Good morning, sunshine!" I coo. "How are you today?"

He gifts me his open, happy smile, his eyes shining brightly. "Happy not to be in school, mom, duh! How are *you* is the question?"

I shrug. "Missing you guys. Wishing this nightmare was over all ready. I hope you all are behaving for Phaedra."

He smiles and nods happily. "Of course, we are. Auntie Phae is fun." He studies me more closely, his boyish face growing uncharacteristically serious and concerned. "It doesn't look like you're having fun, though."

I sigh and give him the best smile I have at the moment.

"No, kiddo. This definitely isn't fun. I'm scared for us all and want it to be over so we can have some peace."

He frowns and shakes his head in disbelief.

"Peace is only in a perfect world, Mom. This isn't that place."

I'm stunned at his words and the depth of their truth, and I sit and stare at him in awe as I consider his position, wondering where he got the source material for such a philosophic worldview.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Nowhere. It's just truth." He shrugs. "Facts."

"So then if we can't hope for peace, what's our goal?" I ask the boy, deeply vested in his answer.

"To do our best," he says simply. "All we can do is do our best."

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We talk about a little bit of everything and nothing for the next several minutes, and I find this is exactly the medicine I needed to soothe my agitation and settle my frustrations. Maybe, I hope, I've done my best as a mother if this boy and his loving spirit are indicators of such things. I silently thank my fortunes for having steered me and my maternal instincts towards the light. As we prepare to sign off the call, Treat reveals his true reason for reaching out.

“Last piece, Mom. Can you remove the time restrictions on my Switch? I mean, if we're not in school, do I really need the limits?”

I laugh, pause our call, and scroll to Nintendo's parental controls app to grant his wish. We say our goodbyes, and I pray he feels the depth of my love and adoration as I thank Heaven for smiling on me so richly. Once he breaks the call, I keep my seat at the table for long moments, basking in my blessings and the welcome reprieve from my worries. Too soon, though, I'm shaken from my reverent bubble when my phone rings again.

“Ms. Winston, glad I reached you. This is Lt. Tomlin with the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office,” I hear after swiping to answer. “I'm downstairs in the lobby and thought I'd take my chances and see if you're in. Is now a good time to talk?”

I've often wondered if it's normal to have these moments of truth, the clear signs and indications that corners are about to be turned, trials are about to be faced, and endings are about to be written. I count this ability among my superpowers most days, but right now, this feels more like a curse than a consecration. I close my eyes and prepare for what I least expect as I give Tomlin our room number and await his arrival. All too soon, he's at the door, and I pad over to open it, my legs numb and weighted with anxiety and dread. I'm guessing my anxiety is no secret based on the way Tomlin regards me. I never want to be a tragic heroine or the poster child for pity. So, I do my best to smile and be upbeat as I invite the man inside and offer him a cup of coffee and a seat on one of the many sofas that I'm growing to hate. He takes me up on the coffee, so I head to the kitchen to quickly brew a cup. What I don't immediately realize is that Tomlin follows along to the kitchen, so when I hear his booming voice, it takes me by surprise.

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“Ms. Winston, how have you been?” Before I can answer he laughs at the question. “I guess that’s a silly thing to ask,” he offers with a look around the place. “What’s not to like in a place like this?”

I find I don’t like his tone or what he implies, but I’ll let him indict himself before scolding. I turn to face him, tilt my head to the side, and paint on the most innocent face I can.

“Oh, I don’t know, Lt. Tomlin. But I can tell you that I’d much rather be in my own home with my children knowing that I’m safe from harm and that my life’s back to normal.”

The coffee machine sounds the end of its brew cycle, and I reach behind it to grab a few packets of cream and sugar. I retrieve the mug and head back to the living room, walking past Tomlin without acknowledgement.

“I guess what I meant to say is that it’s really nice here, Ms. Winston,” Tomlin says as he follows me from the kitchen. “Sorry if that didn’t come out sounding quite right.”

I take a seat on one of the sofas and motion for him to take the seat across, but I don’t acknowledge his words. Not yet. There we sit together in uncomfortable silence until I’ve had enough of our standoff.

“Tell me what I can do for you, Lt. Tomlin.”

“Well, you can let me start over,” he offers.

His face is contrite, and I truly don’t think he meant to offend, and so I’ll oblige him his do-over and see where it leads. I give him a nod and a smile.

“By all means, Lt. Let’s begin again.”

“Right, well, we know a bit more about the Conway boy. Now, you said before that you didn’t know him well, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. I also told you that his mother had an affair with my ex.”

He nods. “You did. And that’s what I’d like to focus on for a little bit. Do you know how long the affair went on?”

I look to the floor and shake my head. “I can’t really say, Lt. Tomlin. From what I’ve been able to figure out, I was late in discovering the truth, probably just a few weeks before we separated.”

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He grimaces and I brace myself for whatever he might say next. I don't know whether breaking bad news is part of the police academy's curriculum, but the shift in Tomlin's demeanor tells me he's probably about to apply one of the suggested techniques with me.

"Well, Ms. Winton, would it surprise you to know that it may have been going on for years? Maybe throughout your entire marriage?"

I sigh and give him a small smile. I'm not exactly surprised by this news. I'm not sure what it has to do with the current situation, though.

"I'm not sure anything surprises me anymore honestly. Why does it matter, though?"

"There's no easy way to say this, Ms. Winston, so I'm just going to put it out there. Thad Conway says your ex is his father."

I slump back into the sofa and let the words flow through me a few times. Tomlin goes on to say something about realizing this must be a shock and hating that he had to bring me this news on top of everything else. I think he says more, too, but I can't be bothered with all of that. Not now anyway.

"How does that translate to vandalism and death threats?"

"I'd like to talk about each of those things separately, Ms. Winston. Conway knows we've got him on the vandalism charge. He's not copping to it yet, but he's definitely responsible, and the motive seems to be jealousy. Says you all received the better part of Dr. Caverton's affections."

"But?"

"But, I'm not so sure he's behind the threat that you received. We've got him paying the one kid to leave the threat against your sons. But I don't think he made the threat against you."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I don't think he has any feelings about you one way or the other. He's far more focused on your sons and what he feels he didn't get from your ex. Our theory is that he vandalized Dr. Da Rocha's car because he thought it belonged to your oldest son. He carries around heavy resentment towards the life you and your boys seem to have."

He leans forward in the chair, his expression sincere and concerned.

“His mother might have fed that resentment. From what we’ve been able to piece together, the boy and his mom have a seriously dysfunctional relationship. I’m hoping we can learn more later today. We finally got her to agree to sit down with us this afternoon. Probably has more to do with the fact that we’re holding the boy at the juvenile detention facility in Leesburg than with a sudden willingness to help us out.” He considers me for a moment. “Ultimately, this is the reason for my visit today, Ms. Winston. Would you mind telling me again about your relationship with Malady Conway?”

I frown. “I wouldn’t call it a relationship at all. I really don’t know what else I can tell you that I haven’t already said before.”

“Anything at all that you can offer,” Tomlin prompts, “even if you think it’s inconsequential or repetitive, would help us out, Ms. Winston.”

And so, I run down for Lt. Tomlin the details of my non-relationship with my ex-husband’s apparent long-time lover. Divorced from a husband who left shortly after their son’s birth, she’s always been a petty, catty bitch towards me. Malady flaunted her affair with Trent in my face with deliberation and delight, ensuring as many of our neighbors knew that she was his side piece. There were whispers between moms at the school events I’d attend to support the boys. Shortly before Trent and I separated, I began to get sympathetic looks from neighbors I’d encounter in grocery store aisles. Then there was the brazen woman herself, who made it a point to make herself visible whenever she saw me. A chronic peeper, Malady used her perch at her living room window to scope out my movements, and she’d use her advantage to try to intimidate or rattle me. The woman loved to stand and stare mockingly at me as I returned from work or headed out to run, which wasn’t too predictable during that time thanks to Trent’s disdain for my doing anything that didn’t feature him as the supreme, sole focus. If I had time to run, he’d say, then I was ignoring my responsibilities to our home. The one thing Malady didn’t do, however, was approach me. Even after

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Trent left, she kept a wide berth between us. Yet, she always made it known that she was watching me. Over time, I chalked it up to petty woman shit and did the only thing a rational person would do. I ignored her. Still do.

“So, she obviously carries a grudge. Like I said earlier this week, grudges often get passed along to children,” Tomlin reminds me as he pulls a notepad from his pocket and scribbles down whatever notes might prompt his memories and guide his questions when he sits down with the woman later today. After we chat a bit longer, he thanks me for my time, returns the pad to his pocket, and rises to leave. I get up, too, needing him to say aloud what it seems he’s suggesting.

“You believe Malady is behind all this?”

He’s expressionless in his regard, being careful not to influence my perspective. “I’ll let you know after we’ve talked.”

I nod and show him to the door, but he turns to me before we say our goodbyes.

“Ms. Winston, are you available today around 2:30 or 3? Ms. Conway is due into the station at 2.”

I eye him curiously. “I don’t have any plans. What’s your angle? You think I might serve as a visual catalyst to the truth?”

He smirks. “Something like that. I’d like to see how she responds to you. Might help us get closer to closing this case.”

After some serious cajoling by the detective, I agree, and he thanks me again. He turns and leaves this time, leaving me to stew in a goulash of worry, resentment, and confusion as I wait to find out what could possibly have flaked out this Conway child and his mother so profoundly that one or both of them would feel the need to hurt us.

I arrive at the Eastern Loudoun Station of the county sheriff’s office around 2:15. When I’d texted Mateo about my plans, he’d called me agitated and irritated that I’d agreed to go to the station without him. But I managed to smooth out his anxiety by assuring him that I wouldn’t approach Malady or the boy on my own. I also agreed to let one of his drivers take me there and back, which seemed to soothe any sting that might have remained. Because I

have no idea what to expect from this little stunt, my gut is tied in knots and my breathing seems off, shallow and irregular. To say that I'm nervous isn't really accurate, though. It's the uncertainty of what I might learn that has me on edge. It's the not knowing how I might react. Hell, with the way I'm feeling right now, I might catch a case if this woman pushes the right sequence of buttons. I smile at the thought and file it away just as quickly but nevertheless consider how exposed and vulnerable all of this has made me. I need to get this over with. I look at my phone again. It's 2:18 now, and I blow out a breath in frustration. Clockwatching can be a bad habit with me, and I'd prefer not to let that take hold on top of all the other ways I'm feeling off center and losing my mind at present. So, even though I'm early, I decide to send Tomlin a text like we discussed and let him know that I'm here. Maybe we can get this done sooner so I can get back to my life.

Ten long minutes pass before his reply lets me know that it's a good time to come inside. I steady myself and let the driver know that I'll be back shortly. At his insistence, I key his number into my phone in case I need anything. I find his request a bit over the top when you consider the fact that I'm about to walk into a building full of law enforcement professionals, but I understand both its intent and its genesis, so I don't argue. This is more of Mateo letting me know he's here with me.

Once inside the oddly shaped facility, all pointy and angular in ways that mimic 3D design and so unlike what one might expect in a police station, I take a look around for the dispatcher's desk, which is where Tomlin suggested I plant myself until he sets up the chance meeting between Malady and me. I locate it and pace towards it with deliberation. When I reach the desk, I give my name and am happily absolved of needing to provide any additional information. Deputy Ryder, as he identifies himself, tells me that Lt. Tomlin let him know to expect me and that he'd prompt me through all I needed to know and do.

"For now," he directs, "have a seat to your right. I'll let you know what comes next, ma'am."

I do as he says as he types something into his computer and goes on with his work. Needing to focus my attention on

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something else, anything else, I pull out my phone and search for my Solitaire app. Old school, to be sure, but a tried-and-true way to pass the time. Five or so minutes pass before my attention is stolen by the sound of voices approaching from an adjacent corridor. As the voices grow closer and footsteps make their way into the foyer, Deputy Ryder calls me up to his desk, allowing enough time for Malady to spot me and react. She doesn't disappoint.

"What the hell are you doing here?" A shrill outburst from behind demands. "You here to help them try and pin this on me and my boy!?"

I turn around to face her briefly, shaking my head without responding, keeping to the plan Tomlin directed me to follow. I return my attention to Deputy Ryder.

"Answer me, bitch?!" she yells before taking a few steps closer. And because I can't resist, I turn around to see how this plays. "Just like I told these cock suckers, I'm telling you to leave us alone! You walk around thinking your shit don't stink just like all the other women like you. You're all exotic looking, you mixed up, mashed up mess! You push women like me to the side without a further thought. Oh, look at me!" she continues to taunt, "I'm black girl magic. Hear me roar!"

She sneers and walks closer to where I stand.

"Not so bold now, though, are you? See, I know all about you, Alli," she barks. It's hard for me to control the cringe I feel at her choice of nickname. "Trent told me all about you. Why do you think he spent so much time with me? He could never be himself with you and all of your unrealistic expectations and demands. All he ever wanted was to succeed, and you stood in his way every time. So fuck you!"

"It seems you've crafted quite a different version of reality," I say with forced calm. But I hold my head high and walk around her. "You'll excuse me, Malady, but you and I don't have anything to say to one another."

As I pass her, she lunges at me and grabs my arm.

"I'm not done having my say, bitch," she sneers.

But as far as Tomlin and his associates are concerned, she is. They grab her by both arms and pull her away from me, keeping her restrained as she begins to scream and protest. They take her back down the corridor from which they came, her rantings fading to muffled, garbled nonsense as the distance between us grows. I remain standing in place, rooted in shocked silence while I try to process the interaction and its many revelations.

“You ok, Ms. Winston?” I turn my head to see Deputy Ryder standing by my side now. From the look on his face, he’s accustomed to stepping in to help with emotional clean up after nasty interactions, but I wave him off, not wanting to expose myself to anything or anyone until I’ve had time to roll this around in my head a time or ten.

“I’m fine, thanks. Please tell Lt. Tomlin I’ll be in touch.”

“Of course, ma’am. I hope the rest of your day gets a lot better.”

His smile is kind and genuine, and I return it as best I can, though I’m sure the effort is as weak and misshapen as worn, stretched elastic.

“Thank you,” I say and head toward the door and back to the car.

Mateo

Later that evening, back in our suite, Alexa and I share a quiet dinner, each of us squarely locked inside our thoughts and troubles. This has been one shit-ass day but a necessary one as I shed myself of Antonio and the chokehold I’ve allowed him to have on my life. I took my first tangible steps down that path today when I filed my intent to take a leave of absence from the university after this semester. I also visited my attorney to begin the process of removing Antonio’s name from the home I co-signed and financed for him a few years back. This isn’t spite. It’s about moving forward, and I can’t do that if I’m not happy in my work, and I’ll never be as long as he’s making power moves that disrespect everything except his wants and wishes.

At the height of his climb to impress and entice his way into a new socio-economic band, he approached me about helping him

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purchase a sprawling estate, not too far from where Alexa lives now. I'd turned him down at first, realizing the deep risks I'd be taking on by underwriting a seven-figure transaction for a man who didn't seem to have either the capacity or desire to manage himself to success, let alone manage such a weighty investment. But, as ever, I allowed him to convince me to support him, a decision I grew to regret rapidly. At first, he kept up with the payments as required, relishing in the ability to entertain his university set in such an impressive setting. But that all came to an abrupt stop about a year ago. He stopped paying the note on time, so the burden fell to me or I'd risk my credit rating because of his indifference. His explanation for not paying was bullshit: it wasn't convenient for him to flow easily between the school and Middleburg, so he decided it was no longer wise for him to use his money to make the monthly note. I learned the truth about this from my mom, however. He can't make the note, she surmised, because he's waist-deep in gambling debt. Mom's helped him out a few times, too, she said, but that hasn't stopped him from continuing to build more debts that he can satisfy.

So, with lemons-to-lemonade determination, I've relieved him of at least one burden. My lawyer tells me that our situation isn't typical and wasn't immediately encouraging. But he did suggest a path forward, and Antonio should receive a quitclaim deed in his office tomorrow evening shortly after he leaves to get ready for the Beecher reception, playing nicely into my plans to amputate him from my life once and for all when I see him at the event.

As I bring my focus back to Alexa, I tell myself I'm doing the right thing in not saying more about my problems and entanglements. She's grown more insular as the evening wears on, doing her best to conceal the depth of her hurt, still shaky from her encounter with the Conway woman. As the evening wears on, I'm able to distract her here and there, but it's clear to me that her mind revisits, examines, slices, and dices her reality. She radiates an unrest that I can't defuse or penetrate. I won't push her, but I know the day's events have had a profound and life-changing effect on her outlook. I can't imagine what she's thinking and feeling, and I don't want to press her tonight. I can help her most

by keeping her focused on other things. So, that's what I do. I tell her about the reception tomorrow evening and that I'd like her to go with me. I tell her how much I look forward to helping change the subject, and we agree to call it an early night. I think we're both hoping to find some comfort in sleep.

Friday, October 18

Alexa

Even as he's cloaked himself in secrecy, Mateo's kept himself close to me over the past couple of days. Though we've spent much of this time apart, his deliveries of creature-comforts, mindless, frequent texts, and games of Chess with Friends with Trace as he and his brothers enjoy their unexpected break from school made it clear that he's here to help me as I work through this separation from my kids and the question of why anyone would want to see us harmed. Either Mateo needs precious little sleep, or he commandeers the time-space continuum so he can bend the pace of these days to his will.

Having decreed tonight an official date night, Mateo hurries us from our suite at the Ritz and into a town car around 6:30. He's been vague about what to expect tonight, so it had been hard to dress for the evening. Because I hadn't brought anything appropriate to wear for such an event, I'd taken a trip to Tysons Galleria earlier today and selected a taupe cocktail dress with a tight fitted bodice and swingy A-line skirt that stops above the knee. Paired with appropriately high multi-colored pumps that could withstand hours on my feet and a similarly hued wrap, I was fall chic and comfortable.

About 40 minutes later, we pull up outside a row house in Foggy Bottom, one of the District's more expensive zip codes. This piques my interest when I put that fact together with the fact that a professor is hosting this evening's event. Then again, we're not that far from Mateo's penthouse. Just as there's a story with him, I'd wager there's a story behind this Professor Beecher and his nearly million-dollar home. I notice Mateo studying me as I survey my surroundings. This isn't something new exactly, but there's an added intensity to this scrutiny. I quirk a brow, and he

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casts his eyes down, his lips curled into a smile that lets me know he has something on his mind.

“You really are a stunning woman.”

His voice is quiet, a little reverent even, and it seems odd. He insists he’s fine, but I’ve felt this curious energy since we left the hotel. It’s hard not to feel that as deeply as I feel the passion beneath his words.

“You’re just trying to get into my pants,” I say, feeling the need to keep things between us light.

His smile turns easy, which is exactly what I was hoping for.

“That’s no challenge, love. You’re not wearing pants.”

I give him a wry grin. “No panties either but—”

He growls and it’s low and triggering.

“You’re a horrible, evil woman. Sexy as all hell. But evil to the core.”

“That may be, Da Rocha. But you know what they say?” I raise a brow in question but don’t let him answer. “Game recognizes game. Guess that means you’re nursing a little evil of your own.”

I smile, but it’s not nearly as genuine as I’d like. Something about this place, about his demeanor, hell, the whole evening in general thus far has me on edge. It’s also clear to me that although I’m certain I’ve shown signs of my uncertainty for hours now, he’s been so wrapped up in his thoughts that this is the first time he’s noticed. He frowns and shifts to face me.

“Ok, Lex. What’s on your mind? Something’s bothering you.”

I look at him, choosing what I say carefully.

“Whatever you’re not saying. That’s what’s bothering me.”

He gives a small smile and looks away from me for a minute before answering.

“You’re right. There’s some things I need to take care of. I’m going to have a conversation with my uncle tonight. It’ll probably be tense.”

“And that’s what’s got you on edge?”

He nods. “Yes, in part, love. But I’m fine. Everything will be fine. Let’s just go inside and get this done so we can get on with our lives.”

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I see something in Mateo's demeanor change as he guides us to the front door and rings the bell. It reminds me of the odd way he shifted the night we ran into his friend Becket a few weeks back when we met up for drinks. This mask he wears makes him feel remote, but I refuse to let my mind go there to hide even though bad things followed for us the last time I saw this affect. I shake the eerie vibe free just as we're entering the black-and-white marbled foyer of the house. Curious eyes look past Mateo to me, and I feel naked and unwelcome as though this conclave is closed to all but a select few. The chosen. And I am not among their number. What I don't realize is that the reason for their confusion would make herself known mere moments later. As we make our way to a bar in the ridiculously opulent living room, I hear someone call out, "Mateo! Mateo!" We both turn to see a beautiful woman in a dangerously short little black dress approaching. Her huge brown eyes are laser focused on Mateo, and I watch his expression briefly fill with dread before telegraphing his irritation. His chin lifts in defiance, and he takes a slight step in front of me as if to shield me from a dangerous predator. The energy between them is familiar yet hostile.

"Imagine seeing you here this evening."

The woman peers around him to eye me, her stare cold and assessing. When she returns her focus to him, though, her violet-blue eyes soften, and her longing takes center stage.

"I assumed you weren't coming what with all the calls you never returned."

She giggles and takes a step closer as Mateo steps back and takes my hand.

"Emery, I didn't know I needed to sync my social calendar with yours. Now, if you'll excuse us."

I've never heard his voice so clipped, though the fact that he's gone there in this instance doesn't seem to surprise me for reasons we'll need to talk through later. I look between the two of them as he begins to lead us away.

"And I'm sorry but Mateo seems to have lost his manners," she calls, taking a few steps to match our pace once more. "I don't believe we've met," she addresses me. "I'm Emery Haynes

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Stallings.” She says this with expectation and seems irritated when I show no signs of recognition in response. She flings her long, dark hair away from the one shoulder over which it currently cascades. “And you’re?”

“My girlfriend,” Mateo answers for me. “Now, once again excuse us.”

His eyes dare her to try to stop us, and she wisely, but reluctantly, gets a clue and doesn’t pursue again as we move into the next room and away from her until we reach the balcony.

“So, I can ask—” I begin, but Mateo jumps in.

“But you won’t have to. Come.”

Once he’s exchanged pleasantries with a few of his colleagues, he leads us with purpose to a balcony that backs the home and offers a break in the activity.

Mateo

That was rude and likely sus AF, I know, but running into Emery first thing this evening is the absolute last thing I would have wanted. Of course, I knew it would happen. I wanted it to happen. Just not as soon as we arrived. I run a hand through my hair, searching my brain for the cleanest way to help Alexa’s mind put out the fire Emery deliberately set.

“First, I’m sorry if that seemed rude, but Emery is bad news.”

I take a deep breath before filling in this gargantuan blank in my past for her. I grab her shoulders and choose my words with deliberation, bending a little until I capture her gaze.

“We met when I first started as an associate professor at the university. It was a couple of months that turned out to mean far more to her than they did to me. But she doesn’t want to let it go.”

I wasn’t proud of my next admission, but it was necessary to leap this hurdle and get back to trying to have a fun night out away from Emery’s drama.

“If I’m honest, she never was more than a decent accessory and a way to pass time.”

Alexa studies me, her eyes rapidly assessing me for signs of deception or maybe omission. I see her inner turmoil as the golden

amber glow of her eyes is doused by the stormy emotion this bitch has stoked.

“Is this why you’ve been so closed off? Is this Emery the something you wanted me to avoid? If you’d be more comfortable here alone, why would you think I wouldn’t be ok with that?”

“You know that’s not what’s up in any way,” I answer quickly, stroking her cheek, warm from the frustration and anger she’s trying hard to keep on lock. I’m not surprised by her reaction, but it’s the last thing I would have wanted, especially as we begin taking the steps remaining to connect our lives.

“Would you prefer to keep our relationship away from your colleagues?”

Beyond frustrated and saddened by where her head must be, I tighten my grasp on her shoulders and move more deeply into her space.

“Say that again.” My voice is low and rough. “Look at me and say that again.”

The edge in my voice is more intimidating than I intend, but the raw, simple truth is that I’m mad that she would gut herself and belittle her value to me so quickly. We stand there locked in tense silence as our shared telepathy fills in blanks and soothes the frayed nerves that assault us both. As she relaxes, I do, too. But I need her taking to me, and she’s trying to shut down.

“Maybe it’s silly,” she starts, and I can tell she’s reconsidering whatever it is she needs me to know, “but something changes when we’re out in the world. You’re different. *We’re* different.”

Her voice massages each word with such an airy quality that I wonder if what she said was intended only for her subconscious. Her eyes are wary, but because I can’t exactly read what’s happening with her, I don’t answer at first. It’s my turn now to study her, my mistress of many masks. I know it’s not ok, and I know we need to clear this air. There’s so much more I need to say, and I intend to. But right now, I need her to know what’s most important.

“What you need to know, Lex, is that I avoid Emery and any mention of her because she’s poisonous and catty, not because I have or ever had any real feelings for her.”

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I release my hold on her shoulders and reach instead for one of her hands.

“My uncle has this idea that if the two of us are a couple, then his fortunes will necessarily follow.”

Alexa

I step away from him to pace. What he tells me seems true. I also know that there's more he's not saying. The man who relentlessly pries me open until I overflow with feelings and vulnerability is holding something close, and I don't think that something is small. I scold myself as good sense kicks in to return me to normal. I'm not that woman. I don't need my man to tell me every little thing about every little thing. Then, too, I know better than to ignore the feeling that says there's more here to explore.

“Alexa?” he prompts as I remain silent, still pacing and processing the things he did share.

I purse my lips and sigh, returning to where he stands, giving him a smile and a small shrug.

“Thank you for telling me this. I do have questions, but they'll keep.”

Mateo watches me intently as if he's not quite sure if I'm ok with all of this, so I give him an easy smile and the permission he seems to need to proceed with our evening. Once I've closed the space between us, I bring a hand to Mateo's waist and place the other on his shoulder and coax him closer to me. He meets my efforts by bending to close the space remaining between us.

“Look, Da Rocha, why don't we file this away for now and get back in there?”

As I press my lips to his ear, he reflexively leans into the sensation and curls his hands around my waist. As I curve into his hold and lock my fingers around his neck, I feel him relax into the pass I just gave us. Something tells me that ignoring whatever's happening is unwise, but it's all I can do right now.

As we reenter the vast space, we meet with several guests who've arrived in the time Mateo and I had our brief sidebar. After

a short time, the young man who'd been behind the bar when we first entered approaches us.

"Good evening," he says. "I'm Max, and I'll be your server this evening. Can I start out by getting you or your lovely date something to drink?"

I order a Ketel One Grapefruit and Rose Infused Vodka Tonic, and Mateo orders a double shot of Hennessy. Max nods and pleasantly scurries off to fill our orders. I study Mateo for a few moments as if I could find answers to my questions somewhere in the space between us if I stand there long enough.

"You know, you really should have given me some clue about what to expect tonight," I begin scolding him out of the blue. "Look at me! I'm not dressed to be here. First, there's this Emery. Now—"

"Shhh. Come here," he quiets me, pulling me into him and halting my babble-fest. Once I'm fully tucked within his hold, he says, "You look perfect. You're perfect, Lexi." He pulls back, pulling my gaze to his. "Don't let the last few minutes fuck up our night, love."

Though he says nothing further, I think he's debating something as his expression reveals the vulnerability he's begun to gift me with more regularly, more confidently, more expectantly in these last few days. How could I possibly doubt the intentions of a man who's made it his mission to show me his support and affection? Though I could never see him intentionally mistreating a woman, I can tell that warm and attentive isn't his default with the opposite sex. I'm overcome by the relentless menagerie of emotions that have gathered to cast a pall over our night out together. I imagine he reads as much in my face as I see in his. He leans in to kiss me, stealing my reply with his searing focus, clearly intent on keeping me out of my head and in the moment until a booming voice fills our space from behind me.

"Dr. Da Rocha, how nice of you to finally join us!"

My mind is immediately yanked back to the reality of where we are and the fact that we are very much not alone any longer. But when I try to yank my body away as well, Mateo tightens his hold and moves me to his side, locking his fingers with mine and staring

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down the source of the sneer. I recognize the handsome man from the photo on Mateo's mantle as his uncle.

"Uncle," he growls, the single-word greeting dark and icy. Mateo radiates anxiety and anger as we stand together eyeing the man. That's when I notice that Emery has inserted herself into this uncomfortable encounter. She stands by Antonio's side, watching me with deep disapproval as though I were some sort of intruder. I meet her disapproval with disregard and force my eyes to skate past her to Becket, who's standing slightly behind her and to her right. With him is a woman with a severe, short blonde bob who seems to share Emery's disdain for me if the fact that she's studying me like I'm a rare circus freak is any indicator.

"You know I've never had much use for false pretense and breezy chats. Which are you bringing this evening?" Mateo answers, his voice flat and bored.

"Are these fools at it already?" Becket hurries up to intercede, and I start to relax as I get a better read of things. "Alexa, pay no attention to this one," he says, thumbing towards Mateo's uncle. "He's a brute at times, but he's harmless. And it's nice to see you again."

I step just beyond Mateo to take Becket's extended hand when Mateo startles me quiet and slides me out of his friend's reach.

"Alexa, this is my uncle Antonio," he offers, his smile sharp and teasing, "in spite of what his title might suggest, he's more a symptom of working in the same space than a tight relative."

The men all laugh as he nods his head towards Becket, an air of the familiar resonating between them. Something odd passes across Antonio's face, signaling, I think, that he's not quite as comfortable with this storyline as the other men. I watch him dial his composure to inscrutable as he waves off Mateo's comment.

"All I'm saying," Antonio replies, "is that it's been so long since you made our social schedule your priority. One might start to question your commitment to the department. And perhaps to your career."

His words grab a girlish giggle from Emery, but the adults remain quiet. When she doesn't get the attention she was after, and apparently uninterested in the interplay between Mateo and

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his uncle, Emery and the other woman excuse themselves and peel off to the bar but not before shooting me a look that warns of trouble and confrontation. Mateo drops his head, clears his throat and sighs heavily. But his eyes give away nothing of the turmoil he's swallowing back, of the furor I feel pulsing all around us.

"Perhaps you have a point, uncle. Now you'll excuse us."

He gives a curt nod and leads me away from a smiling, knowing Antonio. Becket joins us moments later, his throaty laugh breaking the remaining tension from the interaction.

"And that, Alexa, officially brings an end to the first round of tonight's verbal sparring match."

"Asshole," Mateo mutters, shooting a warning look Becket's way.

We find a quiet corner in an adjacent room and park ourselves there as we settle into some serious people watching. This unusual mix of personalities suggests an interesting story underneath the niceties and formalities they all observe. Having seen Becket a few times now, both in person and during some of my FaceTime chats with Mateo, he's the only one in the bunch who comes close to making this night seem normal. Nearly half an hour passes before Becket excuses himself, but before leaving, he walks closer to give me a brief hug and quick kiss to my cheek, earning him a scowl from Mateo. Something else passes between the two of them, but Becket, of course, deflects with his easy laugh and a shake of the head.

"Alexa, so nice to see you again."

It was hard not to like Becket. But what did he do to Mateo?

Though I can't seem to get an answer to that question, I do get quite the education over the next hour or so. We walk the floors, exchanging pleasantries with this one and that, our hands never empty of drinks or snacks. We've circled back to Becket a time or two, and I even chatted briefly with this Antonio character. He's smarmy as hell and not at all down for Mateo from what I can tell based on the vibes he gives off. He's made it a point of making me uncomfortable, from his stilted conversation to the way he casts his gaze to Emery as he speaks with me as if sharing silent memories of some private joke. Then there's Amanda, the woman

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with Becket, who gives off an energy that's just this side of rude. I've realized that this Emery and Antonio are a team, united in their cause to keep Mateo and me apart for whatever reason. What confuses me is the fact that these people don't truly seem to like each other. Not really. They're simply united in the cause of advancement – of their own personal gains or agendas, that is – so that means different things to each member of this loose confederation.

Things truly get interesting once we're seated for dinner. Antonio points to our joined hands resting on the table.

"What the hell, Matt? You two that attached or you afraid she's gonna disappear when she realizes what's up with you?"

Antonio has studied the two of us tonight as if we were a rare zoo exhibit. Mateo shoots a smirk at his uncle and shakes his head as he picks up our still-joined hands to place a kiss there.

"Nothing like that, Antonio. Alexa and I don't play games with each other, and we don't put on shows. I'm just not dumb enough to let this lovely lady or a fool like you think for even a second that she's not mine."

So, it's safe to say that Antonio is an acquired taste. And knowing that, Becket slides in for the redirect.

"Don't hate, sir. We all know the last woman who even thought to hold your hand for more than a few minutes was your mother."

The table erupts in laughter, all except Antonio, that is, who once again sits stewing as he sips his cocktail. Amanda and Emery don't join in on the fun either. They've sat watching our interactions closely for the past few minutes, trying but failing to seem disinterested.

"I don't know, Becket," Amanda begins once the table dies down. "I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss Antonio's comment. Poor Emmie is still trying to heal the scars that Mateo here left behind. Seems a bit, how should I say it, out of character to think this would be any different."

Becket passes a rueful look between Mateo and me before quietly and elegantly shutting down his date.

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“I know it’s hard for girls like you and Emery to conceive of this, Mandy, darlin’, but the Rolling Stones said it best. You can’t always get what you want.”

As he brings his glass to his lips, Amanda purses hers, anxious and irritated at Becket’s clap back.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Girls like us?” Emery bites off.

“Spoiled, entitled, self-absorbed and disconnected from the real world,” Mateo answers with a raise of his glass, his expression a clear challenge to either of them to say otherwise.

As Emery’s cheeks glow red, Amanda is undeterred.

“That’s an easy enough narrative to default to, I guess. It keeps *you* from having to take responsibility for being careless with someone’s feelings.”

Becket interrupts before Mateo can respond as he slams a hand on the table.

“Stop being a fucking bitch, Mandy.”

The table goes quiet at Becket’s reprimand, which apparently is something that doesn’t come too often.

“Tonight’s supposed to be about socializing and getting to know each other. Instead, you’re hanging on to ancient history that was never anywhere near as relevant as you and Emery like to make it sound.”

He grabs her by the hand and offers their excuses as the pair leaves the table with a rush of hushed curses and whispered rebukes for each other. The only thing that’s kept this part of the evening from feeling as awkward as a sixth-grade dance is Mateo’s clear focus on me, which drowns out everything else and serves as a conversation piece it would seem. As we talk and nosh our way through the rest of the evening, he dotes on me, keeping my glasses full and my libido hectic with his insistent strokes and pets. However, I can’t shake one real and unfortunate warning flare from this evening. Emery Stallings could be a problem for us. I feel like he knows that and that some of his attentions have been for her benefit.

The next minutes are happily unremarkable. Mateo and I settle into easy conversation with an associate professor from the

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department named Chad Whitley and his wife, Soledad, who's the closest thing to normal that I've encountered tonight. Amanda seems to have vanished, and Becket, as ever, is here to provide the bridge to normalcy whenever need be. For his part, Mateo has grown unusually reserved, ever by my side but decidedly playing in the background as our time here draws to a close. When I call him on his sudden restlessness, he pulls me in close for his proposition.

"I'm ready to have you back to myself again. But I have one final thing to do before we go. Hang here with Beck for a bit?"

We agree to meet at the bar once he's had a moment with his uncle, then he excuses himself. As Mateo and his uncle sequester to a corner of the living room, Becket and I head to the bar. Because this has been a small crowd and because any good bartender knows that knowing his audience is the way to good tips, Max holds up a finger for us to wait a moment as he turns to prepare our drinks from memory. He sets them on the bar, gives us a wink, and heads off to serve the next thirsty patrons in line.

"So, if the look on your face is any indication, you've been ready to leave for quite a while."

This is why I truly like Becket. He never minces words or gives them much preamble. When he has something to say, he says it. I give him a smile and take a sip of the vodka drink before answering.

"Well, let's say I've felt more love at my local Wal-Mart than I have here this evening."

His responding laugh is a siren song for Amanda, who appears, it seems, from the great beyond to stand beside him.

"I wondered what happened to you," she says by way of explanation, the upspeak in her voice awakening some of the baser urges that I struggle to keep in check around women like her. Among such thoughts: what I wouldn't give to bash in your head without reprisal.

"Been here, chopping it up with Alexa," he offers and raises his glass to me.

Amanda looks to me in thinly veiled disgust then back to Becket again.

“It’s a good thing I rescued you then, sugar,” she purrs and reaches up to finger his shirt collar. He catches her hand though and returns it to her side, giving her a quick shake of his head. But all attention in the room is diverted by an outburst from Mateo.

“You will *not* walk away from me.”

Mateo eyes his uncle in challenge, but I’m struck by the acidity of his words. I’ve never heard him like this.

“And why not? What will you do, Mateo?” His smile is mocking and challenging to Mateo’s hardened stare.

“It’s already done, uncle.”

The tightness of his words pricks my ears. Though cloaked in the spiked outer shell he’s erected to shank his uncle, I can feel their sadness. This version of the man seems aloof and contemptuous. It’s also the one I was trying to chip away at on the way here from the hotel. It occurs to me now that Mateo must have been expecting this confrontation.

“I won’t go into the details here in such a public place. You can check your office for that. The papers you’ll find there will explain everything. For now, know that it’s over. I’m done with you.”

Mateo turns to walk away, but Antonio grabs his arm and tries to turn him around to face him. It was a bad idea, though, as Mateo whips his arm from his uncle’s hold, jolting Antonio from where he stands.

“You can’t just leave like this!”

“But I can,” Mateo spits back. “I told you, Antonio. I’m done with this. And I’m done with you.”

I can’t hear what he says next, but I can tell Antonio has nothing but spite and revenge on his mind. Mateo stands his ground and gives his reply, which makes Antonio’s face blanch. Mateo shakes his head and turns for the door when Emery magically appears at his side and walks with him out into the night. That’s not what shocks me. It’s the familiarity between them, how he lets her grab hold of him and doesn’t try to pull away. The two clearly have a rapport, and she seems to gentle herself for him. Relax into his presence. Even after everyone else returns to their conversations, I’m left at the bar to wonder what the hell it was

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that I just saw. Becket excuses himself, I assume, to see to Mateo, and of course, Amanda is right there to help me out.

“I’m sure it must be confusing,” she offers.

I turn to her, and she gladly lets me see her intent.

“Seeing Emery rush up to Mateo that way,” she explains and points to the door that I’ve willed to miraculously reopen and reveal Mateo without his, uh, accessory as he’d referred to her. “Seeing them that way with each other must be a shock to you. But I’m sure you know that you don’t just get over a person when he’s the one. When you have as much history as the two of them have shared. Em knows how Mateo and Antonio struggled through the years, so it had to be hard to have it all blow up and so publicly.”

She gives a small shrug, clearly happy with herself for creating such a large mountain of doubt from the dung she’s shoveling my way. Still, I plaster on a sharp, bright smile and deflect her. I refuse to let this sorry woman shake me any further.

“Sounds like you have quite the inside track, Amanda. Does Mateo know how much insight you have into his life? Or maybe your source isn’t quite as accurate as you’d like to think.”

Amanda frowns but it’s more a frown of disappointment, like she’d been hoping to piss me off or hurt me. When she catches her reaction, she smirks at me and purses her lips.

“Ask him yourself then. But brace yourself, sugar,” she says, “You’re not the first one who managed to tie him down for a little while.”

I decide my best reply is no reply and I pray to God that he’ll keep me from cold cocking this bitch. I give her a chuckle because it’s all I’ve got. I then turn to leave the bar, chanting prayers of peace with each step as I make my way down the hall and into the black-and-white marbled foyer which blends dramatically into a walk-down living room. This is too much opulence for anyone’s home, I think randomly as I search for my next move. I release the breath I’ve been holding when I spot Becket, who gives me a relieved nod before tapping something into his phone. He finishes and looks up as I reach him.

“Your timing’s perfect,” he says with a kind, open smile. “That was Mateo. Asked me to bring you to meet him outside.”

“Did he, now?”

His smile fades, revealing a look that’s as odd as he likely finds my answer. “In fact, he did.”

“And what does Emery have to say about that?”

Before he can answer, my attention shoots to Amanda, who’s fast approaching from the left. My eyes remain fixed over Becket’s shoulder, and I can see in my periphery that he’s grown rather interested in my stare-off with his date. I think he’s more shocked that I went there than anything, but I couldn’t care less.

“Amanda, what did you do?”

“I told her the truth, Becket. Somebody had to before she does any more damage to Em’s chances with Mateo.”

I can’t let her see that her words strike as hard and unexpectedly as a belly blow, so I know I need to leave. Now.

“You’ll both excuse me,” I say simply and head outside despite Becket’s pleas for me to come back.

Mateo

I wasn’t counting on Emery chasing after me, but I managed to turn her dramatic, attention-seeking move to my advantage. She clearly had her mind set on creating the illusion that I needed her consolation after my blow up with Antonio. As soon as we’re outside Beecher’s house, I snatch my arm away along with the rest of her hopes and schemes – at least for this evening. She tried but failed to get me to go back in and clear things up with Antonio, but just as I told him, I’m done with all of this. I tell her the truth of my heart, that I love Alexa, that she loves me, and most important, that I’ve never, ever loved her. Not even a little. I let her know with certainty that her leverage is gone now that I’ve freed myself from the specter of needing her father, my uncle, or anyone else for that damned matter to manage or control my professional destiny. I can’t say with any certainty that she’ll give up for good, but I have a pretty good read on this woman. My words and actions wounded and shocked her, so she’ll need to

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take cover away from me. That's good enough for now. It'll give me the time and space to deal with Alexa.

She walked past me with barely a glance after I asked Becket to let her know it was time to go. The reticence and mistrust I see reflecting in her eyes now are killing me. She'll barely speak, and I know it has everything to do with Emery's performance tonight.

"So, I'm going to ask a question."

Hearing Alexa break her silence is as welcome a sound as a cooing newborn. Beck warned me that Amanda Boylan had stirred up some trouble that I'd need to work out. So, I'm prepared for pretty much anything. I give Alexa my full attention as we begin the short drive back to my condo. Her eyes are wide as she assesses me, a sadness having replaced the glow and anticipation I'd seen mere hours ago.

She clears her throat and sets her sad gaze on my face.

"Who is she to you, Mateo?"

I run a hand through my hair. I don't want to get into the complexities of my relationship with Emery because I never want her mischief touching Alexa, dirtying her, eventually finding a way to break her heart. I need her to know that Emery's maneuverings and manipulation are a matter entirely apart from her.

When Emery started popping up randomly, I knew this moment would come. In spite of all my careful planning and calculating, all the deflections and dismissals, she'd be here to try and stake a claim I took back long ago. I take the next few minutes explaining to Alexa that when I'd joined the staff at the university, Emery and I had an arrangement: we'd attend university affairs together and enjoy a loose, friends-with-benefits agreement as well. When she decided she wanted more, I cut off the frequency of our encounters and picked up the pace of my prowling for random sex. These things only seemed to challenge and encourage her. I didn't bend on my position, but I didn't exactly turn down her advances when she felt the urge to be with me.

"That was a particularly low point in my life, Lex," I say by way of prelude, needing to ease into the thing I absolutely don't want to tell her.

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“Emery’s always been headstrong and full of defiance, and at the time, it entertained me. I knew she thought she was in love with me, but I didn’t give a shit about her feelings. I was comfortable with the arrangement.”

“So, you kept seeing her, sleeping with her, spending time with her without regard for the fact that she wanted more.”

“Yes. Yes, I did,” I say, simply, not proud of the truth. God, I want to leave things there, but I have to press on.

“But I still didn’t budge on having a relationship with her. I kept it casual. So, as with all things Emery, she resorted to the nuclear option: she took her demands to Daddy.”

Alexa watches me carefully, her face carefully blanked of expression.

“And then?”

“Ellison issued me an ultimatum. Either I fixed things with Emery and gave her what she wanted or never receive tenure. Maybe even lose my position.”

“Excuse me? That’s ridiculous.”

She leans away from me and drops her head back to hit the seat.

“It is, but there’s more.” I sigh and scoot over the close the distance she created between us. “My uncle is a serial gambler, and Stallings has paid his debts off more than a few times. Antonio has no way of paying him back because he won’t stop gambling. So, they have an arrangement. Anything Ellison needs done, anything at all, Antonio makes happen, no questions asked. In return, Antonio never has to worry over his debts. In Ellison’s eyes, the greatest of these debts is his daughter. Emery wants me. And he’s determined to see that she gets exactly what she wants.

“You have to understand, Lex,” I continue as I move even closer to her, hoping that closing the physical space between us will make this go down easier, “I owe Antonio for giving me a way out of Colombia. For a long time, I allowed him to continue to hold the advantage as he reminded me of how different my fortunes might have been without him. In his mind, my having ties to Emery benefited both of us. So, for a short time, I listened.”

“And?”

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I swallow hard before saying what I need to say. “And we got engaged.”

“You what?”

“For a couple of months, we were engaged.”

She inhales a shaky breath, closes her eyes, and slowly shakes her head. What feels like minutes is truly just seconds, but it feels like my words have somehow stretched time, allowing her to linger and process and dissect my revelation, suspending me and our future in uncertainty and confusion.

“And you didn’t think it might be vital to tell me something like that?” Her voice is strained and oddly remote, like it cost her everything to ask the question.

“It wasn’t vital, love. Not to me. It was business only. And that’s what’s always killed her. See, Alexa, I never loved her. She knew the score – she was a convenience. An arrangement I agreed to at the urging of my uncle. But it was never love. At first, there was an attraction. But then I inherited assets, and she began to cling. She had the name. So, her father and my uncle worked to exploit us both to their own ends. I let Antonio convince me that an alliance with her was the right thing for both our careers, but especially for me in terms of tenure. I liked her well enough at first, but it was never about love. She always thought she could make me love her, but I wasn’t in the market for love – not after Janeila. But the more I tried to make her see that wasn’t going to happen, the harder she’d push to get her way. Over those two months, I felt nothing but remorse, and I had to let her know that. She tried to convince me that I was just scared of such a quick change until I called off the engagement. Emery dealt with that by convincing herself that I’ll come back once I’m done getting laid. Shortly after you and I met, I stopped seeing her and wouldn’t take her calls, so, she started the press.”

Alexa takes this all in as we sit in silence for a bit, each of us lost to our thoughts. Now that I’ve brought her up to speed, I need to know we’re solid.

“Are you with me still, Lexi?”

I’ve startled her from her thoughts and her cheeks pink slightly. When she turns to me and lets me see her disappointment and

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heartache, my chest tightens and my heart tumbles around frantically.

“Come back to me, love,” I plea, watching her closely as my fears come to life. I feel like she’s looking through me, not really seeing me as she shakes her head vigorously.

“No, Mateo. You need to help me see why you didn’t think this was something I needed to know.”

I let her see my shame over what up to now has been the biggest mistake of my life.

“Her father has never forgiven me for hurting her and has decided to hold tenure over my head as his revenge until I see things his way, which is to settle down with his daughter. My uncle has always felt that our fates were entangled and has been pushing for me to give in to Em. That once I do, I can live my life any way I see fit.”

“Em. Hmm.” She frowns, her anger seeping through the hurt she’s tried to manage for the past few minutes.

I try to laugh off her offense at my use of nickname. “Come on, Lex.”

“No, I think you should call me Alexa,” she spits as she moves away from me. “In fact, I think you should probably just stop talking.”

“Not until you hear me out. What I told Ellison earlier today and what you saw with Antonio tonight, it was all the truth. I’m not going to allow them to continue holding a youthful mistake over my head. I’ll be out on sabbatical effective immediately while I figure out what comes next.”

“You mean you don’t know what comes next? What, so next you’re going to tell me that you love Em, too, and that you just can’t make up your mind?”

We slow to pull next to the curb outside of my building, and as soon as the driver parks, Alexa pops the door open and flies from the vehicle. I scoot out behind her and rush to catch up, needing her to understand all of this. Needing to cage her until she sees things my way. To coax her back to me even as she shuts herself off.

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“I understand that you’re angry, Alexa,” I begin once I’ve matched her pace, “but don’t you dare mock what I feel for you.”

I reach for her hands to get her to stop and look at me.

“Don’t stand there and try and make it seem like suddenly things are different between us. No, I didn’t tell you everything about my short time with Emery. And I’m sorry I made that choice. Agreeing to marry her was the biggest lapse of judgment in my life. And my way of dealing with it was not to deal with it. I’m not proud of the decisions I made, and I don’t like to talk about it.”

She gives me a sad smile as the first tears begin to flow freely down her cheeks. I pull one hand free to wipe away the wetness and hopefully at least some of her sadness.

“Maybe you’ve never fucked up so hard you needed to bleach the world of the evidence and try and remove the scars you left behind. But I have. And it doesn’t feel good. I don’t like how Emery can’t, how she *won’t* move on. I don’t like that I feel responsible for that no matter how I try to convince her to find someone to be happy with. And I fucking hate how you’re looking at me now. You’ve put up the walls again, love. And I’m not sure you’ll ever let them down for me again.”

“I’m not either, Mateo. But I don’t know anything right now. Don’t you get it?”

She searches my eyes like she did all those weeks ago, wise teacher to errant child, seeking the best way to make her point stick.

“I don’t care that you were engaged to her. I care that you didn’t tell me about it. I care about why you didn’t trust that I wouldn’t judge you for your past decisions.”

She fights through her thoughts as her sobs begin to muddle the clarity of her words.

“Like I said, love, I didn’t think of it that way.”

Each word is flavored with desperation as the weight of Alexa’s reaction begins to fatigue my hopes.

“At first, I was too focused on myself. On all that I had to lose. Then, I didn’t want to add to all the other problems you’ve had to

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take on. In the end, I made a conscious decision to keep this quiet for now. And I need you to forgive me for that.”

“I need you to let me have some time to think.”

I nod reluctantly, but I need her to give me something more to hang onto.

“Ok, but what exactly does that mean?”

She pulls her hands from mine as she backs away, studying my face the entire time, and I can’t help but shake the feeling that she’s trying to commit it to memory, commit me to memory, before she ends what’s yet to get started.

“I don’t know. But I need you to give me space. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know, Lex. But we’re not going to figure this out tonight. Why not just come up, get some rest? You can kick my ass in the morning.”

She gives me a tiny nod, which seems to require the entirety of her effort and strength. So, I bend to kiss her on the temple and tighten my grip around her waist, cloaking her protectively, possessively as we head into my building and attempt to leave this strange evening behind us.

Chapter 32

Saturday, October 19

Alexa

The morning sun streams into Mateo's bedroom as my mind comes alive for the day. Mateo kept me close to him even as I tried to wiggle away throughout the night. With a new day ahead, I try to find a more positive outlook than the one that troubled and saturated my sleep last evening.

I brush my wild hair from my eyes and squirm a little to wrestle free, relying on autopilot to guide me to the bathroom after what feels like a fitful night. As I stand in the mirror to examine my reflection, I see that I greet this morning a disheveled mess. My hair has gone full curly/kinky, and I'll need some time to tame this beast. I'm considering my options as Mateo stalks into the bathroom and crowds my space. Like a hover craft, he's refused to let me stray too far from his sights since last evening. I can't lie. I love his attention. It's heady and addictive, and I may be strung out from having had him rain all of this down on me these past days.

"Shower with me," he purrs, reaching around to strum my left nipple as he kisses down the column of my neck. "Let's wash last night away."

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I sigh as I melt into the sensation.

“I can’t think when you do that.”

“That’s the point, baby.”

He pulls back and swats me on the ass. While I take off the t-shirt I’d swiped from the bureau in his room, he takes deliberate strides to the shower and turns on the taps. Once he’s adjusted the water to his desired temperature, he sheds his boxer briefs, leaving me to admire his tight ass as he disappears into his linen closet. When he comes out, I recognize the two unlabeled, amber-colored bottles in one hand as his mother’s, and his other hand is outstretched in invitation. I take it and follow him under the shower spray, letting the combination of the hot jets and his busy hands calm any lingering worry and angst from last night. I’m lost to him and these sensations, his ministrations, these moments that let me know with quiet confidence that this is where I’m meant to be.

I let the water cascade over my hair, resigned to simply wetting it and taming it into an updo, but Mateo takes over.

“Let me.”

Not sure what he’s talking about, I’m surprised as he reaches for one of the unmarked bottles and pours an ample amount into his hand. He turns my back to his front and begins to spread the creamy concoction throughout my water-tamed curls, taking small breaks here and there to press whisper-soft kisses on my back, shoulders, and neck. His touch is sure yet gentle as he massages the silky suds onto my scalp and through my hair. The scent is a delectable blend of floral fragrances with a hint of musky jasmine, I think, and I’m transported to a place of calm, hope and comfort. I scan my mind for the last time anyone took care of me this way, and I come up empty. From my earliest memories, I was encouraged to be independent, and though my brain locks in on a misty memory or two of Mama Esperanza giving me a bath and me with soap in my hair and eyes, those times seem unremarkable by comparison. I’m hard pressed to find a caring moment among these flashes of the past. I can’t care about that as I hum my approval while he tends thoroughly and lovingly to each strand, each curl. “Feel good?” he asks as he places a tender kiss to my

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temple. But all I can do in reply is to mold myself more snugly into his chest. Each touch is reverent, and his voice soothes as he urges me to tip my head back so he can rinse away the suds. He pauses briefly to kiss and to tease but smacks my hands away when I grab at him in response.

“Patience, greedy girl, I’m not done.”

A second bottle now in hand, he proceeds to pour conditioner on my hair. Once applied, he backs me up and urges me to sit on the built-in shower seat before exchanging the bottle for a wide-toothed comb that I hadn’t noticed resting beside me. With care and concentration, he kneels before me to comb the cream through my hair, which is apparently happy for the intervention. My curls have relaxed into loose waves beneath my shoulders, and I decide right then to commandeer a few more of his haircare bliss-in-a-bottle products to add to my own growing collection before I head home.

Once done, he settles in behind me on the shower seat before switching the water flow from the fixed head to a handheld attachment. With me straddled between his legs, he rinses my hair, and my body sags forward while the conditioner and my worries flow down the drain. After a few moments, he returns the sprayer to its stand, reroutes the water flow and tries to pull me back into his body. But I turn to face him instead, twine my arms around his nicely roped shoulders and scramble up his lap to kiss the hell out of him.

Mateo

She groans as I take over the kiss, dragging her closer and closer, petting and stroking her back, her ass, her everything, until we’re both panting and on the brink of orgasm from our touches alone. She grinds on my thigh, seeking welcome pressure while she tugs at me feverishly, urging us both towards our finish. We groan and howl our ecstasy in unison as we hurdle over the edge. Our coupling is messy and cathartic, defining our place in each other’s lives more clearly than any words could ever declare.

I pick her up and carry her out of the shower, pausing to grab a couple of towels to dry us off. The way she clings weakens my

knees as I move us to the bedroom. I place her on the edge of my bed, drop to my knees and wick the water away from her, taking my time to love and caress and kiss away any doubt, fear, or anxiety that plagues her. Her phone begins to chirp in the distance, but she shakes her head and says, “No,” as she reaches for my hands to pull me up beside her on the bed.

I lift my eyes to meet hers and take her face in both of my hands.

“I love you, baby.”

Her answering smile ignites a deep, feral desire that we never get to explore.

Alexa

My phone continues ringing every couple of minutes, crying out to me in urgency and recharging my anxiety. Add to that the distant ring from Mateo’s intercom and our morning mood is effectively dashed. As he goes to answer the insistent ring, I give in to my phone’s cries and find two voice messages from Lt. Tomlin. I’m disappointed and low-key pissed at the short, vague message.

Ms. Winston, it’s Lt. Tomlin. I have an update for you, so please call when you get a chance. You have my number.

But I can’t take out on him the fact that my libido is angry about the copious cock-blocking that seems to want to ruin my morning. So, instead, I pull on the change of clothes I’d packed and head out to the kitchen to see whether whatever pulled Mateo’s attention away is any more intriguing than the cryptic message from Tomlin. When I reach the kitchen, he’s sitting at the island with his head in his hands.

“Hey,” I greet, “you ok?”

He jerks his head up, and I see a mix of panic, fear, and regret in his eyes. When he doesn’t speak at first, I’m shaken, but I wait patiently to see what’s on his mind. When he finally speaks, I find myself wishing he hadn’t.

“Listen, Alexa, Emery’s downstairs making a stir about not leaving until I talk with her. She knows she’s not welcome here. But she’s determined to have her say it appears.”

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His eyes are sorrowful, and his attitude is edgy, making me wonder exactly where his head is. Check that. I need to know where his heart is. Is he upset because she's here, or is it just because the timing of her arrival is inconvenient because he's here with me? Stop it, I chide myself, but I'm having trouble pulling my mind back from this oh-shit cliff. He doesn't need to know that right now. What he does need to know is that I know, have known, that there's much more to the story of his time with Emery than he's shared so far.

"Well then," I spit, "duty calls. Go. Go sort out whatever loose ends obviously remain between the two of you."

"Lexi, no. You've got the wrong idea. Absolutely wrong."

"Maybe so—"

"Not maybe. Definitely."

He walks over to me, but I back out of his reach. That doesn't deter him from closing the distance and crowding my space.

"Emery means nothing to me, love. It's you. Only you."

He searches my eyes for the things I'm not saying, but I won't let him find them until I have this other part of his life that he won't peel back and share with me. Instead, I back away once more and hold my chin high.

"Let's go see what's so important. I'll wait here while you put on some clothes."

He nods and moves to leave the room, though it's clear he has more to say. When he meets me in the kitchen mere moments later, he's agitated but tries to tone down his angst for my benefit. "Come," is all he says, reaching for my hand, grabbing his keys, and leading us out and towards the elevator. Though we say nothing, he never releases my hand despite my attempts to pry it free. When we reach the lobby, he nods to the desk attendant before leading us towards the exit. Spotting us, Emery saunters our way with much too much sway to her hips, her eyes bright with trouble. She ends her walk of seduction when she reaches us, and it's a labor to keep my face neutral. Her intent is to demean and irritate me, and I'm not about to allow this woman that satisfaction. When I don't show signs of breaking, Emery, still unfazed, dives right in.

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“Matt, you left before we had the chance to have a proper talk,” she cuts her eyes towards me, “in private. I’ve been trying to reach you since you left me at Beecher’s last night. I mean, really! The way you left poor Antonio. And my God but Daddy’s furious right now.”

She’s all righteous indignation, hands on hips as she clucks her tongue and points a beautifully manicured finger his way.

“All the upset you’ve caused. I would think you’d want to be accountable for your thoughtless actions.”

“Emery, you had no business showing up at my home, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised since you can’t recognize boundaries,” Mateo scolds, his voice icy and clipped. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, so stop trying to cause trouble. We’re over. We’ve been over. Now you’ll excuse us.”

Mateo tugs on my hand and proceeds to walk around her, but Emery has other ideas.

“Mateo! Come back here and talk to me right now!”

I half expected her to tap her foot and hold her breath when he ignores her and walks us towards the exit. Unfortunately, she catches up to us before we make our way outside. She gives him a disapproving glare before baring her teeth.

“Since you’re in such a hurry, maybe you can at least clear up a misunderstanding for me.”

She gives me a smile meant to chastise before opening fire.

“If I’m not mistaken, sugar, we had an understanding. And that means I’m the one who should have been on your arm last night. Not this bitch!”

Her eyes, loaded with equal parts accusation, hurt, and anger, darken and dilate, signaling the start of one of three things, I’m guessing: a tantrum, tears, or trickery.

I take a step closer to this haughty mess of a woman and size her up like the trash she is.

“I’m no bitch,” I hiss at her, my eyes narrowed and face hardened with a scowl. “But you seem to have problems understanding no. The man told you no. It’s time you listened.”

Mateo brings his hands to my shoulders and squeezes lightly then heaves a heavy sigh.

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“I’ll say this one last time, Emery. You and I were never what you wanted us to be, and we never will be. Alexa and I are together, and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

His words wound her, and her eyes water. But she’s not done pressing her desires.

“You sure about that, Matt? You sure you want to hurt me like this?”

“You’d have to have feelings for me to hurt you. This shit is done, Emery. It’s not happening. Not today. Never again. Now go. Or I’ll call the cops and have you removed.”

Mateo opens the door, ushers me to the car I didn’t know he had waiting at the curb, and crowds in behind me, obviously anxious to be done with the sniping harpy on the sidewalk. We’re on our way in short order, and he begins explaining his ties with Emery in greater detail, though I still feel like there’s more he needs to tell me. He’s left out a main ingredient in this shit sandwich. It won’t necessarily make the sandwich less shitty. But whatever he’s not telling me would make the shit go down a lot easier. I don’t know why I think that. And in my state of mind, I can’t be certain that I’m not just feeling desperate and completely unsure of much of anything. But he’s standing on what he’s told me. So, I guess my gut and his story will call a stalemate until he’s ready to own the look of sorrow that’s shaded his expression ever since he began talking about this strange relationship with this woman I think I could hate. Either she means a hell of a lot more to him than he’s saying, or he feels guilty about something he did to her. He feels responsible for her in some way. I don’t know, and I refuse to sleuth this out. I resent that I would even have to think about coaxing the truth from him when you consider everything else going on in my life. As much as I try to focus on some of that, my heart hurts at the thought that Mateo may have secrets that could affect us.

“Better now?” he asks, his voice cautiously hopeful when he’s finished laying out what he says is the back story to this horror flick. I study his face some more as if the closer inspection might yield a clue to the missing facts he’s yet to share. When I haven’t answered after a moment or two too long, he prompts, “Alexa?”

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“Sorry,” I clear my throat and give a half smile. “No,” I answer him honestly. “But I’ll figure it out.”

I shift my attention to my purse and sift around the contents in search of my phone. I need something, anything, to take my mind away from my suspicions. When I finally locate the phone, I type in the passcode and decide now’s as good a time as any to return Tomlin’s call. Mateo watches me the entire time, but I refuse to acknowledge him. But I quickly realize that sitting here in silence is stupid.

“I’m returning a call from Tomlin,” I explain. “Apparently, he’s been trying to reach me this morning.”

Grateful for the opening I provide, Mateo reaches over and grabs my knee, giving it a squeeze.

“Hopefully, it’s good news. We could use some of that.”

I give him a small smile as my call rolls to voice mail. I curse softly and take my turn at phone tag, leaving a message for him to call me back when he can.

“Any thoughts about what we want to get into today?”

I consider his question as I look out the window at the trees and homes we pass in a blur as our car heads west on I-66. Luke and the boys are in Charlottesville this weekend with Lindy for a home football game and a much-needed break from our hideout drama. I have nothing but time and freedom. But as I turn to face Mateo, I feel uncertainty over whether I have him the way that I want him.

“Not sure yet. Maybe we play it by ear?”

My phone’s escalating ring tone interrupts before he can protest, the caller ID announcing Tomlin’s call back. Relieved that I don’t have to explain my reticence just yet, I hold up a finger and open the call. Tomlin launches into his news as soon as I greet him: Malady Conway was arrested last evening for stalking, trespass, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. She’s being held pending arraignment at the county’s Adult Detention Center, which means the earliest she could be released is Monday. With both the boy and his mom in lock-up, I can get back to living life freely, safely, and openly. I thank Tomlin for his news.

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“Was that what I think? Did they make an arrest?” Mateo prompts as soon as I cut the call.

I nod. “Yeah. They’ve arrested Malady Conway. She’s being held at county jail. It’s the weekend, so she won’t go before a judge until Monday.”

“So, you’re safe? You’re good now, no?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Then I say we go celebrate.”

Chapter 33

Alexa

When we enter our suite at the hotel about 15 minutes later, I know what I need more than anything. I need the space and time to think, to listen to my heart and understand what it's saying to me. To do that, I need some time to myself. Alone and in my home. And so, I head to the bedroom, grab my suitcase, and begin to pack my things.

“What are you doing, love? You going somewhere?”

I close my eyes and gather my courage before turning around to see his confusion as he realizes my intent.

“Now that Malady's been arrested, I don't see the need to be here any longer. I'd like to go home.”

He walks closer to me as he tries to assess my meaning. “Of course, let's go—”

“Alone,” I say, cutting him off.

“Talk to me, Lexi.”

His voice is pleading and plaintive. My heart seems determined to leave my chest, beating with such force it leaves me breathless.

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“I will, Mateo, but I need some time to sort what happened last night and again this morning. I’m angry, and it all shakes me up more than I want to admit.”

“About Emery? I’ve told you. She means nothing to me.”

He crowds my space and reaches for my hands, but I pull away and take a few steps back to keep my head thinking clearly so I can say what I say next.

“We all have a past, Mateo. But it looks like you haven’t finished handling yours. Until you do, I’m not sure that you and I can work.”

The words roll from my tongue so simply I almost believe I mean them. But God, how they taste like liver, that thing that no one should ever eat under any circumstance. My eyes leave his as I grab at the words that I need to say next. I can’t watch his turmoil while I struggle to manage my own.

My voice is scarcely above a whisper, but my anger and agitation ring undeniably clear through each word. Even so, I’m not sure he’s heard me until he hisses my name, demanding that I look at him. When I do, his eyes capture me, arresting me, forcing me to feel the ferocity of his vulnerability. I want to drag my stare from his, but he has me stuck in place, where I’ll apparently remain until he’s done with me.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me what’s changed, but don’t lie to me or to yourself, Lexi. And for the record, I don’t agree.”

I frown, not sure of his meaning.

“We work,” he explains, “when we finally acknowledge that it would hurt like fuck if we didn’t.”

His voice is raw and exposed as emotion erupts between us. He steps into me and drops his forehead to mine as he runs his hands up and down my arms to soothe and tame my dismay and desolation.

“I told Emery a long time ago never to come to my home. Until today, she’s always honored that request. The fact that she showed up today surprises me as much as you.”

I close my eyes as his words recall the images that taunted me last night and again barely an hour or so ago. I shake my head and voice the fears screaming their cautions.

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“I saw determination. I saw irreverence in her. And all this,” I say, my hands waving around wildly in the air, punctuating each word with my desperation and despair, “has taken our attention away from the return of the other woman you nearly married. What’s the latest with her?”

The acerbic taste to my words surprises me somewhat. My frustration with these various threads of our lives coming undone at once has me feeling overcome and edgy. I saw something between Mateo and Emery that I can’t put into words, something that makes me feel dark and hopeless as I sense that in some way their lives are tethered. Over the past few days I’ve wondered more than once at his mood swings and cagey energy, so counter to the always composed, self-contained man I want so badly. The few times I asked about Janeilia, he’d refocused our discussion on keeping the boys and me safe.

He pulls his hands back and threads them through his thick, messy waves, the surefire tell for when he’s stressed. I don’t think he thinks I’m being snarky, but he’s not happy to be having this conversation.

“Lexi, love,” he pleads, his voice weary, “Emery means nothing to me. I know you know that. People are whispering in her ear about us, now that she’s seen us, she’s determined to cause trouble. Don’t let her.”

“I don’t think that’s up to me.”

“It absolutely is, love. If you don’t know how mad I am for you,” he pauses with a shake of his head, a hint of self-deprecation in his expression, “then seriously, woman, you need your head checked. There’s no room for thoughts of anyone but you. Not Emery. Not Janeilia. Just you.”

My heart yearns for him, wanting, needing all that he’s saying to be true so that his words can wash away any lingering doubts I may have about this relationship and our connection. You can’t feel someone this completely and with such certainty otherwise. Every breath he takes I take. Every cut he feels makes me bleed, too. I reach up to stroke his jaw because I need my skin on his again and nearly start at his starved reaction to my touch, like he’d been craving it for an eternity and might not get by without it. It’s

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hungry and needy, and I want to fall into him and let that be enough.

“I’m not mad,” I say instead quietly. “Well, I am, but not at you. In a lot of ways, my reaction to all of this with Emery, your reaction to Janeilia’s call, whatever unfinished business you have with both women, they come from the same place. And together they keep trying to wedge us apart. If our being in a relationship means looking over my shoulder for the next scorned ex to come trying to stake her claim, if it means not fully knowing whether I have all the information I need to move forward with you in confidence, I don’t see how I can do this.”

He pulls back and takes me by the shoulders, gripping me there tightly and possessively. When he crouches to find my eyes, I find his radiating with fury and bright with determination.

“Alexa, I’ve never been anything but honest with you.”

He leans into me a little closer and gives my shoulders a firm squeeze as if the press of his hands could will the power and passion of his words to cement their truth around me. But I’m afraid to relax into their promise too soon. Not until I resolve the dissonance colliding against every cell in my body. I reach up to grab his hands, give them a quick squeeze, and walk us towards the settee that sits at the foot of the bed. I sigh and admit my skittishness.

“I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something you don’t want me to know, and I need you to tell me about it.”

“Lexi,” he insists, “I’ve told you everything. Anything left unsaid between us is either immaterial or so extraordinary it’s mine to live with and accept.”

He smiles and nods once, as if resigning himself to reveal a weighty truth. He brings his eyes back to me, and his lips fall naturally into that soft smile that melts my insides and curls my toes.

“From the time we met, for me, it’s only ever been the two of us. You can call it by whatever name you choose. Label it however you want. But together, we took our time and learned about each other, learned to trust each other. And you haven’t had to look over your shoulder. Not even once. Yet, you’re dancing all around

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the truth that you know and can see and you're trying to end us. So, in case I need to say it again, my heart is yours. Only yours. I need you to remember and trust that."

He pulls me into his chest, and I let him, needing to feel his warmth and comfort. I nuzzle into him as he rests his cheek on the top of my head and squeezes me tightly.

"I'm so sorry you had to see Emery's ass this morning. It won't happen again."

Something in his words, perhaps his lack of awareness and naivete, angers me, and I pull away and put space between us, turning away from him because I feel too much when I see his eyes.

"I don't know how you could possibly make that promise," I reply, incredulous that he'd go there. "I'm not so sure your Emery does anything she doesn't want to do. She seems the type to try to claim for herself whatever she craves. And it's foolish for you to try and make me think she's just going away."

"It takes two, love," he notes wryly before adding, "and she's not mine. Never was."

"Hmm," I hum. "But you were planning to marry her. She might disagree."

He growls, turns me to face him, and drops to his knees in front of me.

"I don't care what the hell she says."

As he smooths his hands from my shoulders down my upper arms and back again in a slow rhythm, I feel panic and sadness rippling from him with urgency. His eyes have gone deep green and swim with sorrow.

"All I care is what you say. What you're thinking," he adds.

I sigh and drop my head to his chest and wrap my arms around his waist, needing our closeness restored. Needing his heartbeat to soothe the discord Emery created.

It doesn't. Not completely.

"I've told you," I press again, "I think there's still more you're not saying, Mateo. I also think you're naïve if you believe she's just going to go away. A woman who goes to the lengths she has doesn't give up just because you tell her to. I don't think I would."

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“Then are you saying you didn’t mean what you said a minute ago when you tried to call it quits?”

“No,” I shake my head slightly. “But I was letting my instincts rule,” I admit quietly. “I thought maybe I should tuck my tail and run while I still could.”

“Could you? Walk away? From us?”

His voice is low and even, free from all tone and energy. That doesn’t explain why they slice at the self-preservationist in me, wounding and shaming as they hit their intended mark. We’re picking at some vital scars whose scabs, long crusted and sealed, give birth to fresh, tender versions of our hurts and disappointments. At the places we keep safely in the dark.

“I didn’t say—”

“It’s a yes or no question, love. Pretty simple.”

“Walking away would kill me, Mateo,” I answer simply with a shrug. “But this isn’t just about what I feel. It’s about being able to trust in us.”

He pulls back to search my face, but I hold up a hand before he can try and convince me to let this go. He’s angry right now, and I’m sorry about that. But there are no passes this time.

“Mateo,” I sigh and struggle for words, “you’ve got to let me have some time to think. I’m not sure what I think about anything right now. All I’m asking is that you give me the time and space to change that.”

He groans and entwines our hands.

“It feels like you’re trying to close yourself off again. Tell me that’s not what you’re doing. I won’t let you do that.”

The words come out as a plea, the sound threatening to tug my heart into submission. But my brain keeps us from walking to the end of this plank just yet. It’s much too soon.

“Mateo—”

“I won’t let you walk away.”

“I’m not breaking up with you, Mateo. But can you give me time to think about why the men I give my love refuse to be completely honest with me?”

He pulls back to look at me, and I die when I see hurt and anxiety where hope and determination danced moments ago. I can

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tell this isn't what he expected, though he relaxes a little into the knowledge that I'm not cutting him off. Resigned for now, he drops a kiss to my forehead.

"Lex," he says, his voice hoarse and tentative, "I may not have shared chapter and verse, but I promise I haven't lied to you or misled you, love."

"No, I don't think that you have," I agree, "but make sure you're being honest with yourself, too."

When he releases the deep breath he pulls in, I want to fling myself into his lap and give him the reassurance he seems to need. The reassurance that we're good and we're whole. But first, I need some time to page through today's events while I take a bare ass look at myself. I ask him once more to give me some space today while I head home to think. He looks apprehensive and begins to push back, but I won't relent. Not today. The only concession I can make is to ride together to my house. On the ride there, our emotional storm subsides, calm flooding the space between us like the distant rush of winds buffeting a blizzard past your window. The sound is ominous, but there's comfort in the knowledge that you're in place and safe even as chaos swirls all around you. I have zero visibility across this snowy vista of fear, want, and raw truth. Nothing can come into full view until Mateo and I navigate our way through the dark places tucked away within the soft terrain of our hearts. We'll need to give them light. Then we'll need to keep them safe from ourselves.

When we arrive at my house, we embrace at the front door one last time before he turns to leave, pausing at the bottom of the steps to consider me briefly.

"Take the time you need, love. And I'll be here to help you find the right answer."



It's definitely good to be back in my home. But I can't enjoy this day, this sense of relief and freedom, until I sort things out with Mateo. It's not a question of whether he's hiding something. I know with certainty that he is. When I've had the chance to settle in once again, I retreat to my den, running through the past week and trying desperately to reconcile the mashup of events in my

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mind. I should be relieved to know that I'm safe from threats and mischief. My sons are in good hands and can return to their home and to their lives knowing beyond doubt that they'll be safe and sound in their own beds.

Yet, all I want is to run to Mateo. At the same time, I want to run from him. I want to shout at the universe for allowing confusion to cloud and threaten our relationship. I want to destroy anything that dares try and tell me that this man isn't wholly and completely mine.

Most of all, I want to know why he held this from me and why I feel like there's still more he's not saying. I can understand his shame and remorse. I also understand and appreciate that he didn't want to add this to my overflowing list of burdens. But I can't understand why he thought I'd ever judge him for his decisions. My phone begins chiming in the distance, and I smile weakly when I recognize Mateo's ring tone. It's only been a few hours since he left. I'm not ready to speak with him, so I let the call roll to voice mail.

Why do the men in my life hold secrets, I wonder in frustration? What is it about me that causes them to want to shield and blind me to the truth? Do they think I can't handle it? Or is their silence some indication of arrogance and self-preservation?

The last thing I need or want now is to celebrate my failure at relationships with men, but it does bear some closer examination. If I'm going to sit and admire this problem, I reason, then I'll need a bottle of wine at my side. I head to the kitchen as my phone begins ringing a second time, sounding Mateo's insistent ring tone once more. The sound summons the tears that have been waiting to purge me of the emotional poison of the past 24 hours. Hell, from the entire week of hellish revelations and nonsensical issues. Frustrated and determined to dull the growing ache threatening to consume my whole being, I grab the chilled wine, place it on the counter, grab the biggest wine goblet I've got, and pour freely and boldly. Next, I grab and slip on a jacket from the hall closet, take the too-full glass to the basement, and head out to my garden. It's much too cold out, but I can't and won't care about that. I just need the space to think and quiet the noise inside my head.

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As I flip on an outside light and walk out onto the patio, I look around for something, anything to distract me from my pain and sadness as I drop into one of my outdoor armchairs and place my glass on the table before me. Frustration fills me as I settle into the quiet, noting yet again that my plants require some serious pruning and shearing before winter comes in earnest. It's only been a few days since this nightmare of threats and hate came my way. Yet, it seems like everything was so different just a few days ago. Hell, even I was different then.

I grab up my glass and begin to sip as I flip through all I've learned in the last week. I haven't allowed myself time to understand why or how Malady Conway and her bad seed could mastermind a scheme to hurt me or my boys. *Because she carried on an affair with my ex for years, that's why.* I murmur the words aloud as if hearing them will help me process and assign an explanation to this new, fantastic reality. I sigh and close my eyes, allowing the multitude of signposts to replay and confirm this truth. A truth I'd refused to acknowledge despite clear signs. For years. I willingly overlooked what was real because addressing it meant destroying the optics of the life I wanted for myself, the one I needed to be my truth.

I wonder at my apparent tendency to believe in tailor-made realities. It's no wonder considering the people who raised and claimed to love me. From Mama Esperanza to Mateo, everyone who's lived inside my heart has brought me into a handcrafted multiverse featuring their version of what's true. Within each of their worlds, the hurts, mistakes, and misdeeds featured in this life are replaced, erased, or recast as some whitewashed outcome. By stepping through the vortex separating our worlds, I met each of them on their terms, willfully ignoring the inevitable clash that would come when their version of reality met mine, leaving me to question the very foundation of every relationship I've ever forged. I stomp at the thought as soon as it surfaces because I'm not so sure my mind can handle what that could mean. I try to settle into the silence around me instead, but something niggles at my mind, keeping me on edge, making me feel as if I'm being watched. I try to shake it off along with the remaining echoes from

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the past several days of being the target of death threats and violence and lean my head against the headrest. I close my eyes and inhale the thick scent of decaying leaves, welcoming the sweet aroma as it washes over my senses and calms my battered spirit. But my eyes fly open almost immediately when my phone begins to ring yet again, Mateo's insistent urging determined to cut into my hard-fought solitude. I grab the phone and answer with attitude.

"Da Rocha, damn! What part of give me space doesn't make sense to you?!"

The chuckle I hear on the other end snaps me to attention when I realize it's not Mateo's.

"Alexa, it's Becket Oliver. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Shit, Beck, sorry for the attitude." I sigh, close my eyes, and try to dial back my anxiety. "It's been, well, it's been an interesting 24 hours."

"So I hear. That's why I'm calling. I hope you don't mind my reaching out like this."

"Of course, I don't mind. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was thinking *I* might be able to help *you*, even though I probably shouldn't be calling you with this."

I frown at his words, not at all sure what he's beating around about. "Ok," I say, letting the tone of my voice do the talking for me.

"But since it's too late to change my mind now, I think you need to know why Emery keeps turning up. And why Mateo can't bring himself to tell you about it."

"Ah, Becket, that's the problem, though. We both know there's something he won't say, so I don't see how I'm supposed to believe there's no threat here."

"There's not, Alexa. Not in the way you're thinking."

"And what does Mateo think about your calling me?"

"Doesn't know about it. He wanted to clear his head, so he's gone to order some food. Meanwhile, I snatched up his phone and stepped outside to give us a chance to talk. That doesn't give us much time, so I'll just jump in. He's been messed up all evening about the shit with Emery. He says you think he's lying to you,

and that's why you gave him the heave ho." He laughs as he says the words, Becket's good nature pouring through the phone to pat me on the back like an old friend. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you give him shit."

"It's not like that, Becket. I think it's more that I won't tolerate bullshit. And for the record, I simply told him that I knew there was more to his story. That I needed some time alone to clear my head. Nothing more."

"Ah, you'll find that our wonderful friend is often pumped full of bullshit. And in the right doses, it sets him adrift. Which is why I'm reaching out, Alexa. I've been with him for a few hours now trying to help him see that you're not going to leave him if he tells you why Emery won't let go."

I'm silent for what must seem like too long as my mind leaps from possibility to possibility to understand Mateo's continued silence when Becket prompts me again.

"Alexa? You still there?"

"Sorry. Yes, Beck. I can't understand what's so terrible that he'd think I couldn't accept it. More than that, though, I hoped he'd come to me with whatever it is."

"He will, Alexa. In his time, he will. But you need to know that's a tough ask when it's something you're ashamed of."

Becket sighs but doesn't give me a chance to respond.

"See, Alexa, he told you that he called off his marriage to Emery. What he doesn't want to say is that he did it three days before the wedding. And that that's the part she can't get over."

My breath catches as Beck's revelation hits home. "Oh, Mateo, no," I murmur. *He did to Emery what Janeilia did to him. Intentionally.* My heart breaks for him as understanding settles around me.

"I know that he wants to tell you. That he wanted to tell you, especially since he knows you know there's more to his story. But I think you can figure out why he hasn't gotten up the nerve to open up to you on that just yet."

I blow out a harsh breath and try to find a way to put into words the mix of sadness and understanding at this revelation. He can't think I'd judge him. But I wouldn't have thought he'd inflict on anyone else the pain he felt when Janeilia left him either.

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“Becket, thank you for telling me. I can’t imagine what he’s feeling. Just makes me that much sadder that he thought I’d judge him for his actions. I would never.”

“I don’t know you well, Alexa, but I believe you. So, just be patient with him. Give him the time he seems to need to stew and sulk. Let me do the rest.”

Over the next couple of minutes, I listen as Becket shares his plans to help bring his friend around. I also give him big respect for sharing a story with me that wasn’t his to share. He’s a true friend to Mateo, and once he’s done going ape-shit over the fact that Beck has definitely crossed a line, I hope he’ll see and appreciate that, too.

After we say our goodbyes, I let all the feelings and revelations swirl around my mind as I connect dots, dissect my biggest concerns, and try to ease the ache Beck’s insights left behind. But after a few minutes, I find my mind much too restless to make any real sense of things, so I give up trying and head inside to see if a little self-care might ease the noise and at least help me relax a bit. I find I’m still cautious and on edge as I get ready to head back inside, looking around the patio several times before convincing myself that I can feel secure in my home once again.

After checking the sliding door lock over and over, I refill my wine goblet, gather my favorite bath gel and soaking salts, and head quickly to my bathroom for a long, hot bath. What I find when I flip on the light, however, freezes me in place and my mind hops from anxiety to outrage to horror as I take in the scene before me. Slightly dried rose petals dust a path from the bathroom door and disappear into the tub, where I find a cream-colored note card resting atop the red heap with the name “Alli” scrawled across the front in familiar bold strokes. My heart begins to race as I realize that at some point in the recent past, my ex-husband entered and violated my space. With shaky hands, I slice the envelope open and read Trent’s message before dropping to the floor and allowing the despair and anguish to which I have every right to sweep me away.

Not sure I like what you’ve done with the place. Let’s discuss.

About the Author

Wife, mother, daughter, lover of all things literary, Kim Greer has been a storyteller her entire life. From her early days narrating school plays to penning short stories as an angst-y pre-teen, Kim's passion for connecting audiences with a good read has bled into all facets of her life. A journalist by training, Kim holds a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Virginia and an MS in Journalism from Columbia University. She began her communications career as a business reporter for *The Poughkeepsie Journal* and later joined *Crain Communications*, an international publisher of business/trade magazines. In her role with *Crain*, Kim was also a periodic contributor to *Advertising Age*.



Photo by Barton Greer

After leaving journalism, Kim created and led strategic marketing and communications for several global corporations, helping them to tell their stories and brand their services. In 2008, she launched a boutique marketing consultancy serving clients primarily in the professional services, IT, defense, logistics and

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aerospace arenas. Concurrently, as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, she designed and taught PR and communications courses for the school's award-winning graduate program.

Kim lives in northern Virginia with her fabulous husband of 26 years, the youngest of their three sons, her 91-year-old father, and their Rottweiler, Oba.



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