

A photograph of a man's torso from the chest to the waist. He is wearing a white, long-sleeved button-down shirt that is unbuttoned at the collar and open down the front, revealing his bare, muscular chest and abdomen. He is also wearing dark-colored jeans. The background is a plain, light gray.

LAW OF *Seduction*

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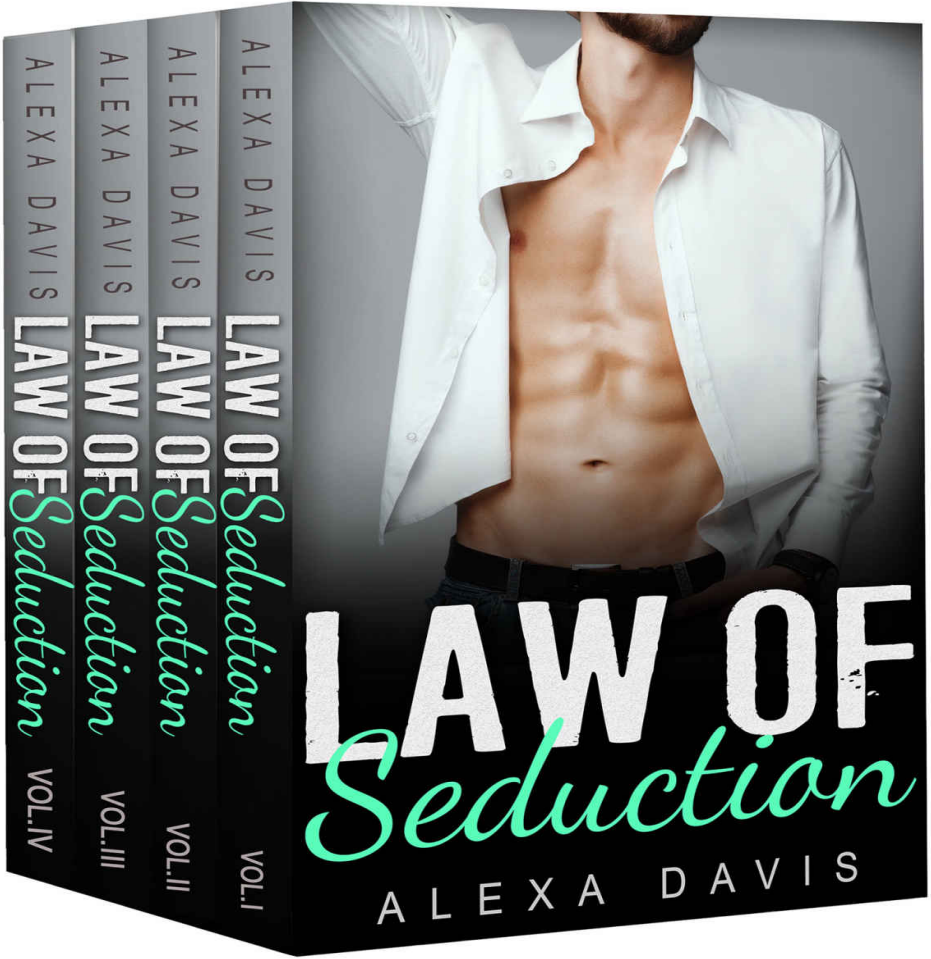
LAW OF
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LAW OF SEDUCTION: THE COMPLETE SERIES

By Alexa Davis

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From the Author

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

ALICIA

Never in my twenty-seven years on this earth have I met anyone so infuriating. I was standing in the alcove of the ballroom at the annual Thanksgiving ball the partners of my firm put on and wondering what the hell was wrong with me. I'd let Adam drag me here when I should have known better. I had no idea why we had to hide our relationship. We didn't start seeing each other until his wife had already moved out. I don't understand why she still has so much control over his life. He and I had begun to fight about it almost constantly.

“What is wrong with you?” Adam asked me, mirroring my very thought, “You were rubbing yourself all over Nico on the dance floor. You made a spectacle out of yourself. Is this what you meant last night when you said you refused to play the other woman?”

His green eyes were cold and unforgiving. It's hard sometimes to believe they are the very same eyes that I had melted into the first time I looked into them. I found it funny how Adam had the ability to morph in the blink of an eye from a sweet, handsome, charming man that I could barely resist into this arrogant, condescending person standing in front of me now. What I really couldn't understand was why I was unable to just walk away. Instead, I reduced myself to playing stupid games like dancing with Nico and even letting him kiss me when I knew for sure Adam was looking. Of course, there was no “rubbing.” I was raised by a Lord and a

Lady in the U.K. and taught how to be a lady from the age of two on up. “Rubbing,” as Adam had implied, was not even in my public repertoire.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” I told Adam, trying to feel as strong and determined as I hoped I sounded. “I’m a single young woman. I have every right to dance with a single young man.”

Adam’s dark green eyes smoldered, “Single? That’s funny. I had assumed that since you’ve spent the better part of the last six months in my bed, we were in somewhat of a relationship.”

I sighed. This conversation was already giving me a headache. Forcing myself to keep my chin up and look him in the eye, I said, “Maybe you should tell Marjorie that,” I knew full well that if he wasn’t already angry, he would be now. I didn’t care. I was sick of being the peacemaker.

“I have told you over and over that sharing our...intimate life with Marjorie will only cause her to fight that much harder to destroy me. She’ll want to take you down in the process of ruining me. I told you last night, I am doing my best to finalize this divorce so that she can be out of our lives once and for all. You know that I want nothing to do with her. The sight of her makes me sick. I don’t know what you want from me, Alicia.”

I could feel the tears forming in my eyes. I blinked them back. I refused to cry in front of him. My cheeks burned hot as I said, “If you don’t know

what I want, then maybe we've been wasting our time all of these months."

I stared at him for a moment, and when he said nothing I went on.

I was angry now. I shouldn't have to explain myself, but then again, I shouldn't have put myself in this situation in the first place. "What I want, Adam, is you. I want your time and your attention. I want the Adam that you were when we first met, not the Adam who is constantly exhausted and angry from fighting all day with his soon to be ex-wife. I want a man whose arm I can be on in public. One that I can be dancing with at our own ball, instead of pretending like we're only business associates in order to keep up appearances until your divorce is final. Imagine how it feels for me to have to watch you dancing with other women all night."

Adam's eyes softened and he said, "Maybe the same as it felt to watch you with Nico." I felt a stab of guilt, but I wasn't quite ready to give in. He reached for my hand. I let him take it and he said, "Alicia, I want all of those things, too. I am trying so hard to get Marjorie to agree to this latest settlement offer that we've drawn up. It's that damn lawyer of hers. He keeps telling her to fight for more, that bastard, David Rogers. He won't be happy until he's goaded her into breaking me completely. He seems to have more than a professional stake in this. Maybe she's sleeping with him."

I felt my anger ebbing away already. I'm a sap where Adam is concerned. "I know you're trying. It's just so damned hard feeling like

we're sneaking around all the time when we're not even doing anything wrong. You've been separated for almost a year. You should be free to see whoever you want. My parents are visiting from England next month. I wanted so much for you to meet them as my boyfriend, instead of the head partner of the firm I work for."

He pulled me in close to his chest. I felt him nuzzle his face into my hair and breathe it in. "I'll work harder on it, I promise. Just stop going around kissing my associates, okay? I'd hate to have to beat him up after I fire him."

Adam's voice hadn't changed from its somber tone, and when I stepped back to look up at him, I was a little worried that he was serious. I honestly hadn't meant to goad him into fighting with Nico, or firing him. I'd feel so awful if I were to blame for Nico losing his job. When I saw Adam's face, though, I knew I needn't have worried. He had a handsome smile forming at the edges of his mouth. I knew then that he'd only been joking. I punched him in the arm lightly and with a smile of my own I said,

"You infuriate me sometimes, do you know that?"

"Yes, I know," he said, still smiling. He caught me off-guard then as his sexy lips came crashing down on mine. My head was chaotically telling me to walk away and make him wait until he'd finished with his divorce, but as usual, my body told me differently. I rose up on my tiptoes and

leaned my body into his. Against my better judgement I returned his kiss with the fervor welling up inside of me. Just about the time I was ready to consent to getting naked in the alcove and making love right there on the floor he pulled back and said,

“We better get back before someone notices us missing,”

“Maddening, maddening, maddening,” I whispered, mostly to myself as he straightened his tie and I smoothed down my rumpled gown.

“What was that?” Adam asked, pretending not to hear me.

“I said *yes of course*.” My voice had a sarcastic edge to it that I’m certain he didn’t miss.

“Fantastic,” Adam said, as if settling a business deal in his favor, “We’ll talk more about this later, but thank you for being so understanding.”

I rolled my eyes and as I left the room first, I turned back to him and said, “You can bet we’ll discuss this later.”

I ended up going home alone that evening. Before the night was over, Adam received a call from the CEO of the large petroleum company our firm had begun representing recently. There was a large oil spill in the gulf, and Hanson and Partners were the attorneys for the defendants, a large and very rich company that was being sued for hundreds of millions by the EPA

and others who had smelled money and jumped in on the bandwagon.

Adam normally sent an associate or a junior partner when something came up late in the evening, but this new liaison with the Petroleum Company was sure to prove to be a lucrative one. Adam felt that while we were still in the courting stages at least, he should give them VIP service.

I had been disappointed at first, but once home and in my comfy yoga pants and cotton t-shirt, I decided that a night alone to think might be just what I needed to figure this all out. I made myself a cup of hot cocoa and called Kyla, my best friend. I knew she would be up because she'd been at the party I just left.

“Hi.” She always sounded like she had a smile in her voice. It was one of the many things I loved about her. “Missed me already?”

“Of course, I did,” I told her. I took a breath then and said, “I need some advice.”

“About Nico?” Kyla asked, playfully. She knew good and well that wasn't the advice I was looking for.

With a groan, I said, “No! Did everyone see me make a fool of myself with Nico tonight?”

Kyla laughed. “Calm down, silly. I was only giving you a hard time. I saw Adam watching you and Nico dance, and I swear he had storm clouds in his eyes. Then you two disappeared for a while, and you both looked

happier and a little flush when you came back. I suppose though that since I am the only one at the firm that knows the truth, I was paying much closer attention than anyone else.”

“Thank you, Kyla,” I trusted her with my and Adam’s secret because I knew she was too loyal to ever say anything to anyone. “I hope Nico didn’t get the wrong idea, though.”

“I think Nico indulged a bit much in the champagne fountain tonight. Odds are he won’t remember all that much in the morning.”

“Good. The last thing I need is another man at work angry with me.”

“Is Adam angry with you?”

“No, not anymore, anyways,” I told her. “I just don’t know what to do, though. I’m so tired of all this drama with Marjorie affecting his moods. I’m tired of pretending to everyone at work that I’m just another colleague of his. But every time I think of calling it quits, I look at him and I melt all over again. What’s wrong with me, Kyla?”

“Absolutely nothing at all,” my friend said, “You’re in love, that’s all. It can be the most wonderful, amazing, titillating, frustrating, maddening feeling you’ve ever had. It’s just confusing sometimes. I know it’s hard for you having to hide it.”

“Well, thank you for saying nothing is wrong with me, but you’ve told me what I already know. Don’t you have any special advice that will relieve

this ache in my soul? It wants to reach out to him, but I feel like I have to keep it in a cage.”

“My advice to you is that if your soul is already involved, aching or not, you’re in too deep to get out now. Follow your heart, honey. You have a great head on your shoulders, but sometimes you get too analytical with that attorney brain of yours. Try not to overthink it, just do what your heart tells you to do. Hearts always know best in the end.”

“Thank you, Kyla. My heart loves you, too. Get some rest.”

“I will, you, too. I will see you bright and early Monday morning in court.”

“I can’t wait,” I said sarcastically with my lip curled. The case we had to be in court for on Monday had consumed every one of our waking hours for months now. I wasn’t looking forward to facing the sleazy D.A., but I was looking forward to the surprise we had for him. “The NYPD and our tacky little D.A. are going to be dumbfounded when we present the motion to suppress the confession.”

“Yep, I can’t wait to see Dawson’s face,” Kyla said.

“Me, too!” I heartily agreed. Dawson was Robert Dawson. He was the D.A. for the Manhattan borough of New York, and he was also a short, balding, and pudgy little man with beady eyes and hairy arms that thought his position of prosecutor gave him some kind of clout with the ladies. He

has hit on both Kyla and me more than once. He's a pig, and I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when I offered up the evidence that his police detectives had coerced a confession out of my client after he had asked for a lawyer.

Our client in this case is the son of a very wealthy contractor who was already a client of the firm. The kid's name is Nelson, and he is not very likeable at all, which makes my work even harder. It's not really his fault. He was the product of uber rich parents who had little time to help him develop his social skills and instead gave him every material thing he could ever want. I knew, though, that the kid hadn't done what they were accusing him of. It was all part of a political game and I had no use for people who would play games with a young man's life, whether he's likeable or not.

After hanging up with Kyla, I headed for bed. Just before snuggling down underneath the soft down comforter that my mother had helped me pick out just before my move to New York, my phone rang. It was Adam.

"Hi, baby. Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No, I was just lying down. I'm glad you called."

"I wanted to say goodnight. I hope you're not mad at me still."

I didn't want to get into it again right then, so I said, "No, I understand. How did the meeting go?"

Adam sighed. “This isn’t going to be pretty. A reporter from the *Times* has zoned in on the story and is acting as if she has taken up the Cross. She’s hounding the CEO of Brigham Mobile, no matter how many walls the company puts up to protect him. This reporter, Rose Dugan is her name; I hear she’s like a dog with a bone when she gets ahold of a story. She’s digging into his personal life and personal finances. She has also started beating a drum about his connection to the presidential campaign.”

“Can you get a judge to issue a gag order?” I asked.

“I wish,” he said, “Unfortunately, this was an international incident, and apparently the ‘people’ have a right to know. I’ve scheduled a meeting with Ms. Dugan in the morning. Hopefully, I can convince her to ease up...”

“Be careful. Hanson doesn’t need a reporter snapping at our heels with everything else that’s going on.”

“I will. I just wanted to say goodnight and I am thinking about you.”

“Goodnight, Adam, sweet dreams.”

“I will be dreaming about you,” he told me.

CHAPTER TWO

ADAM

I was running late. The meeting with the oil company had gone on and on last night and then after I'd gotten home and talked to Alicia on the phone, I couldn't go to sleep. I wanted her in my arms. I understood why my situation would upset her. If things were reversed, I doubt I'd put up with it. I just have to find a way to make her understand that I'm doing this for us. If I let Marjorie take everything that I've worked for my entire life, there would be nothing left for us. I'm not willing to let that happen. Alicia and I both just had to be patient. This divorce couldn't drag on forever.

I rushed into the café where the reporter Rose and I had arranged to meet. I only left five minutes late but the traffic on the turnpike had been horrific and now I was running a half an hour behind. I had seen a picture of Rose under her byline in the paper so I knew her as soon as I spotted her sitting at a table alone sipping her coffee. I watched her for a moment, as she had yet to notice me. She held her coffee with one hand and sent and received text messages on her phone with the other. She looked so young to have such an important position. I smiled as I remembered having the same thought the first time Alicia had walked into my office for her job interview. I assumed it must have something to do with growing older. Everyone else seemed to be getting younger. Sometimes I couldn't believe I was already forty. It was kind of a depressing thought.

The young lady finally looked up from her texting and I took that opportunity to gauge her expression as I approached her table. I made eye contact with her and watched her look over my three-thousand-dollar suit. I'm not pretentious. I just truly believe that how a person dresses is an extension of who they are both personally and professionally. I thought I detected a change in the confident expression the young woman had pasted on her face. It was very brief, but I recognized anxiety when I saw it. Holding out my hand as I approached the table, I said, "Ms. Dugan?"

She stood up, all five feet two of her, and offered her hand, as well. I was surprised to find that although her hand was so small and appeared fragile, she possessed a powerful grip. "Yes. Mr. Hanson, I presume?" she said, releasing my hand and sitting back down. "Please, take a seat."

I sat down and said, "Please forgive me for being late. The traffic was terrible for a Sunday."

"Yes, I know," she said, "I drove all the way in from Queens. I think it must be the approaching holidays bringing more people out and about in the city."

"Well, Ms. Dugan, I am grateful to you for spending your Sunday morning driving into Manhattan to meet with me."

"Please, call me Rose," she said, "And maybe we can save the small-talk and get right to the point of why we're here today."

I raised an eyebrow at her brusqueness, but if that's what she wanted, that's what she would get. "Okay, Rose, right to the point we'll get. I like that. Perhaps you can explain to me why you are determined to smear my client's good name all over the front page of your paper?"

"Well...Adam...do you mind if I call you Adam?" I nodded slightly, knowing full well that calling me by my first name was an attempt on her part to keep us on equal footing.

"First of all, your client's 'good name' as you put it, was lost the day he spilled hundreds of gallons of oil into the Gulf and killed countless fish, birds, and wildlife. Not to mention, contaminated drinking supplies to thousands of human beings." I stayed silent, and Rose continued, "Second, I am simply doing my job, reporting the news, as are you doing yours, defending slimy oil barons who support crooked politicians."

I smiled. It was a happy smile, but an ironic one. It wasn't often that I met someone that stood up to me so easily. I knew I could be intimidating and over-bearing. It typically bodes well for me in my business. I could see that with this young lady, I would possibly need to use a softer approach.

"I agree that we are both doing our jobs. What I would like is for us to find a way to do our jobs without resorting to smear campaigns in the press."

“And if I should choose not to smear your clients so called ‘good name,’ what would be in that for me?”

I could tell that although she was doing a great job of keeping her facial features neutral, her eyes were daring me to offer her some sort of bribe. I thought about what Alicia had said about being careful. I got the feeling she was dead on in this case. Rose Dugan was hoping that I would turn out to be a dirty, slimy S.O.B. Smiling what I thought was my most charming smile I said,

“Going to bed at night, happy in the knowledge that you’ve done the right thing?”

She laughed. “I sleep very well at night, thank you for your concern.” Her phone vibrated, and looking at it, she said, “If that’s all, I really need to be going.”

I was confused. I just got here. Was she only just trying to set me up for a bribe? “I thought you wanted an interview from someone close to Brigham Oil? You’ve hardly gotten anything but my name.” Rose stood up with her phone in her hand and her purse on her arm and as she started walking away said,

“No, Mr. Hanson, I do believe I also got your number. Have a nice day.” And with that, she was gone.

I sat motionless for a moment. I was infuriated by this practical child's holier than thou attitude. What could someone so young and inexperienced know about anything? My number? What the hell does she think she means by that? I shook my head and mumbled out loud to myself as I left the restaurant, "She's way in over her head. I hope she knows what she's in for."

When I got to Alicia's apartment that night, she was just putting the finishing touches on the table for dinner. I realized as soon as I saw her how much I'd missed her. God, she's beautiful. I pulled her into my arms and gave her a long, deep kiss. "Wow!" she said, breathlessly when I allowed her to come up for air. "What was that for?"

"Because I missed you, and I needed that." She had her pretty dark auburn hair braided along the side of her face and wasn't wearing any make-up. The freckles across her nose were visible and it made her look a lot younger than her twenty-seven years. I kissed the tip of her nose and said, "I barely slept without you next to me last night." I moved into the living room and she followed me. I loosened my silk tie and plunked my lanky frame down on her couch.

She sat down next to me and put her hand on my thigh. As tired as I was, I felt an erection rising from her simple touch. “Rough day?” she asked.

I ignored the erection for now. I really was afraid that I was too tired. I sighed instead and rubbed my temples. “Rose Dugan is not our only problem where the press is concerned. This entire case is being tried in the press. I talked to Alex today. The president’s campaign manager wants a meeting with me. We want our name taken out of everything concerning this lawsuit. Brigham’s people, however, are holding onto the fact that we are politically connected and want to use that our advantage. I’m exhausted.”

I leaned my head back into the couch and closed my eyes. When Alicia asked if I’d like a glass of wine I nodded, but left my eyes closed. I felt her get up and go into the kitchen. I opened them when I heard her come back in, and as I took the glass with one hand, I patted the couch next to me with the other hand and told her, “Sit.”

She sat, and I put my arm around her and pulled her in close. She smelled so good. It was just more encouragement for my cock to stretch out the front of my pants. “Some days I wish it was like this always,” I told her. “Just you and I, a glass of good wine, and a comfy couch. That’s all a man really needs.”

Alicia smiled and laid her head on my shoulder and agreed, “Me, too.” We sat that way for a while before she finally mentioned that dinner was probably getting cold.

I reluctantly got off the couch and followed her to the dining room. “It smells delicious,” I told her as my senses came alive at the smells coming from the kitchen.

“I made lobster bisque soup, boiled snow crab, and asparagus with hollandaise sauce.”

“Sounds great.” We sat down and ate mostly in silence, making a little small talk here and there, but both of us trying to avoid the subject of work. Dinner was as good as it smelled. I was surprised sometimes at how domestic she was since she was raised in a house with wealthy parents and a full-time staff. She told me it was part of her “training” to be a lady. I helped her wash the dishes and tidy the kitchen. As we made our way back to the living room, I let out a big yawn.

“Would you like to turn in early tonight?” she asked. I was tired, but I needed her worse than sleep. I grabbed her from behind pulled her up against me so her round butt was against my rising erection.

I bent down and put my mouth to her ear and said, “I want to go to bed, but I’m not sleepy.”

She laughed and wriggled her way around so that she was facing me and then she rose up on her toes and kissed my lips. “Then let’s stop screwing around in here.” We walked backwards down the hall with our lips and tongues connected. My hands were busy removing her clothes while we walked and by the time we made it to her bedroom, I had her out of her shirt and bra. Her body is incredible.

I pulled out of the kiss and began unbuttoning her skirt while my hands reveled in the feel of her soft skin. I teased her nipples gently until they stood at full attention and watched as her skirt fell to the floor. I didn’t wait for her to finish taking off her panties before I lifted her up and lay her back on the bed. I grabbed the panties and pulled them down myself and then stood there for a minute just drinking her in.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I breathed out while I began taking off my own clothes. I couldn’t stand her lying there like that and not touching her, so I used one hand to play with her nipples while I finished undressing with the other.

Once I was naked, I lay down on the bed and pulled her up on top of me. I pulled her down for another hot kiss and ran my hands down her back until I got to her ass. I clutched her cheeks in my hands, squeezing and massaging them while she slid her lips down and attached them to my neck. She kissed softly at first, but the harder I touched her, the harder she sucked

and nibbled at my neck. My core felt like it was on fire and my cock was rock hard now. She kissed down to my chest as I continued my massage on her shoulders. By the time she had slid all the way down to my stomach, I couldn't stand it anymore. If she took me in her mouth tonight, I was going to explode. I pulled her back up. She smiled down at me and while I slid her now soaking wet pussy back and forth across my hard cock, I reached up and took out the band holding her braid in place. I ran my fingers through her hair until it was loose around her smooth white shoulders and then I pulled her down for another kiss. I felt her hand slide down between us while we kissed and take hold of my cock. I groaned into her mouth as she gave it a couple of strokes. It was covered with her warm, sticky juices. She pulled her hips up slightly and lined me up with her opening before pulling out of the kiss to sit up straight. She lowered herself down on my cock slowly until I was buried inside of her and we were skin to skin. She whimpered when she hit bottom. God, I love making her moan. My wife had been one cold, uptight bitch. Alicia is just the opposite. She's a little wildcat in bed and I fucking love it.

I reached up and played with her perfect tits while she moved up and down on top of me. I thrust up my hips to meet hers and each time I hit bottom, she cried out. I pulled her down so that I could take one of her nipples in my mouth and sucked her whole breast in. I licked and sucked on

it and the harder I sucked and scraped my teeth along the edge of her nipples, the faster she moved and the more noise she made.

She wasn't a screamer, but she was a moaner. She let me know with her sounds and her movements what she wanted and I aimed to please. She's the hottest woman I've ever been with, and on top of that, she's got a heart and a brain, too. Sometimes I'm not sure how I got so lucky.

After getting my fill of her breasts, I grabbed her back and held her in place while I flipped us over. Nudging her legs so they were wide open, I began to plunge into her with more force. She had her hands on my shoulders and was digging her fingernails into me. The lines between pain and pleasure were blurred as nothing else mattered but the feel of her tight, wet pussy wrapped firmly around my throbbing cock. I reached down and slid my arms underneath her legs and picked them up and rested her feet on my shoulders so I could pound her deeper and harder. I felt her body tense, and she cried out my name in ecstasy as she came. That sent me over the edge and I let go of my own massive orgasm filling her up and then collapsing down next to her in a sweaty heap.

I was tired now, in a good way. I knew I would sleep much better tonight with her in my arms. I also knew that I had to get Marjorie out of my life soon or I'd lose Alicia, and I couldn't let that happen.

CHAPTER THREE

ALICIA

Monday morning came too soon as far as I was concerned. I woke up to Adam dressing in the dark. “Are you leaving? What time is it?” I asked him groggily.

“It’s early, babe. You still have a while to sleep. I have to go home to shower and change before I go into the office. I have an early meeting with Miles Brigham IV this morning. I need to be at the top of my game.”

I sat up and motioned him towards me with my finger. When he leaned down, I whispered,

“You’re always at the top of your game, love. You proved it last night.”

He grinned and kissed me on my lips. “You don’t make it easy for a man to leave, that’s for sure,” he said, “But unfortunately, I have to go. Good luck in court today, by the way. I’ll call you later to see how it’s going.”

I sighed. “Okay, good luck to you, too, and remember – Brigham can’t do this without you. You’re the best attorney in this city and he knows it. Don’t let him try to intimidate you.”

“No one intimidates Adam Hanson,” he said with another grin.

“Good,” I told him as I snuggled back down for a couple more hours sleep. “No one should.” He kissed me once more on my forehead before he left. I lay there before falling asleep, thinking I was the luckiest girl in the world that Adam loved me. I had all but forgotten the argument we had the night of the ball.

Kyla and I both arrived at the courthouse within minutes of each other. Nico showed up as we were climbing the stairs. He was balancing a cardboard tray with four cups of steaming coffee in one hand and a briefcase full of legal briefs in the other.

“Here, let me help you,” Kyla said, taking one of the cups out of the tray and taking a long sip from it. Nico gave her a look and said,

“Gee, thanks. My load is so much lighter now.”

“No problem,” Kyla said playfully.

“Here,” I said, taking the tray from his hand.

“Thank you, Ms. Winston,” Nico said with a mock bow.

Kyla and I exchanged a look as Nico went on ahead up the stairs. Maybe Nico hadn’t indulged in too much champagne to recall our kiss the other night. I had to shake that off for now, though. I had a client depending on me and right now that was my priority. We made our way through the

busy courthouse to a conference room we had reserved for the day. Nelson was already there. He was dressed in a nice suit as we told him to wear and had removed the jewelry he normally wore in the piercings in both his face and ears. His hair was dyed back to its normal shade of brown from the platinum blonde it had been bleached at the time of his arrest. I looked him over and said,

“Wow, Nelson, you look wonderful. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Nelson mumbled a simple, “Thanks.” His dress and grooming exuded confidence and poise, but one look at the boy’s face told just how anxious he was about the trial that was about to begin. I sat one of the cardboard coffee cups down in front of him.

“Maybe a double shot of caffeine will help your mood this morning.”

Nelson mumbled another thanks and picked up the cup. He didn’t drink; he just rolled it between his palms.

Nico sat across from the boy and said, “You understand what is happening today, right?” He waited a beat, and when Nelson didn’t respond, he continued, “Alicia and Kyla have drawn up a motion to suppress the confession. All you have to do today is tell the truth. Tell the judge that you did ask for a lawyer before they even began questioning you.”

Nelson looked up at him. I didn’t like the defeat he already had in his eyes. “Technically, what I said was, ‘Isn’t my lawyer supposed to be here?’

I guess I should have insisted on it.”

“No, they should have stopped right there and let you call us. They didn’t do that. Instead, they ignored what you said and continued on with the interrogation. That’s not acceptable.”

Nelson sighed. “I didn’t do this, you know? I didn’t take money from those people. I don’t understand why they would say I did.”

Nico looked at me. I took my cue and sitting on the other side of Nelson, I said, “Campos Investments lost millions of dollars when your father refused to sign off on the shoddy construction that Limitless Construction Company was doing on hotels. They did their best to run your father out of business over it, but his standing in the community was too strong. Their only recourse was revenge. If they can get a court to convict you of accepting bribes in order for your father to sign off on unsafe construction sites, they can ruin your dad’s good name, and their hope is that the result would be running your dad out of business.”

“I get that,” Nelson said in a whiney voice, “but why me? Why not set up Dad?”

“Your father’s reputation for honesty is what has made his company so successful. They knew that no one would believe he had done this, so they turned to the next best fall guy: his son.” I tried to keep the confident look on my face and in my eyes when Nelson asked his next question,

“I was the perfect fall guy because my reputation is the opposite of my dad’s, right?”

“We’re going to do all we can to keep your past from being allowed into this, okay?” Nelson nodded, none too convincingly, and I asked him, “Are you ready?” he nodded again as Nico and I stood up. Nelson rubbed his face over his hands and looked up at us again. Looking very much like a child, he said,

“Please don’t let them put me in jail. I couldn’t stand being locked up.”

Although our legal team was made up of three of the best and brightest young attorneys Hanson had to offer, none of us wanted to make promises that we might be unable to keep. Instead, Kyla put her hand gently on his arm and said,

“Come on; let’s go get this confession thrown out.”

Kyla, Nico and I celebrated our first victory over lunch. Judge Nolan had agreed that saying “*Shouldn’t my lawyer be here?*” was a statement the police should have explored more with Nelson. The top of Dawson’s bald little head had been bright red with anger by the time we were through with him. I held that vision in my head as I danced back into the office that afternoon – and ran smack dab into Marjorie. Shit.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Marjorie stepped back and looked me up and down as if seeing me for the first time, even though we had met before. She adjusted the lapels of her designer jacket that Adam’s money had bought and said in an irritated voice,

“Obviously,” and then with a weary sigh added, “But I suppose I could expect nothing less from employees of the buffoon that runs this place. Excuse me...”

I stood dumbfounded by the woman’s rudeness and watched her leave. I shook my head, unable to comprehend what Adam must have ever seen in her in the first place. Maybe she was softer once, when she was younger. Some people just find it impossible to age with grace, my mother used to say. I had a feeling that Marjorie was one of those women. I had been close enough to her today to notice the taut lines of her jaw and the complete absence of any lines around her eyes or on her forehead. Adam’s money had paid a fortune for that harsh, expressionless face. I shuddered. No matter what she may have once been, the simple fact now was that the woman was insufferable.

I tried to shake off the encounter and return to my earlier pleasant state of mind as I went in search of Adam to tell him about our victory. As I rounded the corner from the long hall that led to the executive offices, I saw

Mary, Adam's personal assistant, closing the heavy oak doors that led to the executive conference room behind her.

"Hi, Mary," I said. "Is Mr. Hanson in a conference?"

Mary smiled at me, and I couldn't help thinking that the smile caused Mary's face to crinkle in all the right places, making her look radiant. I liked her and appreciated that she was almost always in a pleasant mood, which was definitely a breath of fresh air after my little run-in with Marjorie.

"Hi, Alicia, yes he's in there with Mr. Brigham, Mr. Fritz, and a few other men from Brigham Oil Company. It's getting pretty intense. I was going to get some refreshments in hopes of lightening up the room."

I smiled back at her. "If anyone can do it, it's you, Mary. I can see why Mr. Hanson has kept you at his side for so long, you keep him sane. Would you mind asking him to call or come by my office when he's finished? I have a case I'd like to discuss." It wasn't really a lie. I did want to talk to him about the case. I also wanted to kiss him. My face colored at the thought, as if Mary could read my mind. I would be so happy when Adam and I could stop pretending. Stretching the facts during the course of a case to save a client didn't bother me much, but telling an outright lie to someone I considered a friend went against everything I had been raised to believe, and it seemed like I'd had to do that a lot lately.

Once I got back to my own desk, my receptionist handed me a pile of messages. “Thank you, Carla.”

“You’re welcome; how did court go?” she asked as she followed me into my office.

“Great!” I told her with a smile. “We got the confession thrown out. Without that, the rest is all hearsay and should be easy to discredit.”

“Good!” Carla said with real enthusiasm. “Mr. Dawson called a few minutes before you walked in. He gives me the creeps a little, but anyways, he said he urgently needed you to call him as soon as you walked in.”

“You know what?” I told her with my lip curled, “He gives me the creeps, too. I’ll call him...in a while. Thanks, Carla,”

“You’re welcome Ms. Winston. Let me know if you need anything.” Carla closed the door as she left, and I sat down at the desk to begin sorting through my messages. Most were from clients who were anxious to discuss one aspect of our case or other. As I sifted through the rectangular squares of pink paper, a familiar name caught my eye. The message said, *While You Were Out—Jack Grant called.*

I did a double take at the name. It was one that I hadn’t seen or heard in a message for quite some time. Jack and I had been very close friends since kindergarten. As we grew into adulthood, we had ultimately gone from being friends to being lovers. It was great for a while and I had felt blessed

that my boyfriend was also my best friend. The excitement of it fizzled out quickly, though, and eventually, we both had to admit that we were better as friends than we were as a couple. We had managed to stay friends, and once I moved to the States, I had really meant to keep in touch and maintain our friendship, but life interrupted my plans.

I had heard most recently about him from my mother, who told me that Jack was in a relationship with a woman from the Country Club her and my father had been members of for decades. She said it seemed serious. I remember her telling me that with a frown. She'd been most disappointed when he and I had stopped seeing each other. He came from old money. His parents were very active in the community and my mother and his worked together on many of our charity projects. The Lady Winston had high hopes that I would one day be Mrs. Jack Grant.

I snapped out of my memories and back into the present looking back at the slip in my hand, the number was a local one – not in Europe but right here in New York. I reached to pick up the phone just as it began to ring. I picked it up without waiting for it to roll over to Carla.

“Alicia Winston.”

“Alicia, darling, it's Robert,” came the sleazy little voice from the other side. Feigning ignorance for the sake of insulting him and no other, I almost felt a little ashamed of myself as I said,

“Robert?” with an obvious question mark at the end,

“Dawson, Robert Dawson!” he said, obviously offended. “Surely you haven’t forgotten me already.”

“Oh, Mr. Dawson, I’m so sorry. Of course I haven’t forgotten you. Your first name just threw me off. How can I help you?”

“I want to throw out an offer for that juvenile delinquent in a man’s body your firm is representing. What say we meet for a drink and talk about it?”

I almost laughed aloud, but I caught myself. For the sake of Nelson and the other clients I represented, I couldn’t afford to insult him outright.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson, but I have a full plate this afternoon. Perhaps you can tell me what you are offering and I can pass it on to my client.”

Dawson cleared his throat and the tone of his voice changed to borderline hostile as he said, “I suppose you big time corporate lawyers fancy yourselves better than the average lawyer, too good to slum it with the prosecutor who could maybe make your life easier if you gave him the chance.”

I was silent. I was sorely tempted to give this nasty little man a piece of my mind. How dare he try to suggest that I would even consider trading favors with the likes of him? When I didn’t reply after a few moments, he

said, “But anyways, tell that little rich boy you represent that I am offering five years if he pleads guilty to misdemeanor accepting a bribe.”

“Five years? Are you serious?” I asked, almost certain I had heard him wrong or he had made a mistake.

“He can get ten if the jury convicts at trial,” Dawson said.

“He can get nothing if we get an acquittal,” I said with confidence in my voice. “I think we’ll take our chances.”

“Okay, but don’t forget to offer it to your client. He might want to save himself and his family some embarrassment and skip the trial.”

“Oh, I won’t forget, but don’t lose any sleep waiting for me to call you back on it. My client didn’t do anything wrong. He doesn’t want to plead guilty to anything, and he won’t accept any jail time. You have a nice day, Mr. Dawson,” I said, emphasizing the “Mr.” to make sure he knew we were more foe than friend. After my conversation with Dawson, I was no longer in the mood to call Jack for a reunion chat. Instead, I buzzed Adam’s office.

“Yes?”

“Hi, are you busy?”

“No, just unwinding after that awful meeting.”

“I take it all didn’t go well?”

“I don’t know. Brigham seems to think we are miracle workers, instead of lawyers. He wants us to run off the press and calm the politicians. Alex is

working his magic on the politician angle for us, but I'm not sure what to do about the press at this point."

Alex was Alex Fritz. He was Adam's best friend from college and currently one of the front runners for the Democratic seat that had recently opened up in the House of Representatives. Alex was strongly connected in the political community and even had ties to the White House. He was helping Adam to connect with the people involved in the scandal over Brigham being one of the President's lead campaign funders. He was also charged with the task of severing the ties between the currently offending oil company and the presidential campaign.

"Anyways, how did your morning in court turn out?" he asked me.

"It was great! The judge agreed that the confession was bogus since Nelson had mentioned his attorney and threw it out. Then, just a few moments ago, the world's sleaziest prosecutor called and offered us a deal."

"Great! Was the deal something you think Nelson will consider?"

"Absolutely not, he's offering five years if Nelson pleads to conspiracy to accept a bribe. Nelson will never go for it. But, it does mean that Dawson is nervous. He knows that without the confession, his case is on shaky ground or he wouldn't have offered anything."

"True," Adam said thoughtfully. "He could get ten years or more if we do convict, you know."

“Yes, I do know that. I won’t play games with his life, but I won’t see him locked up for five years for doing nothing more than being a spoiled little rich boy.”

“I respect that,” Adam told her. “By the way, are you free for dinner?”

“With you? Always,” I said with a grin. “Your place or mine?”

“How about Romaletti’s?” Adam said, surprising me.

“Romaletti’s, really? Is this a business dinner?” I asked suspiciously.

“No, it’s an ‘I’m tired of pretending, too’ dinner. The hell with Marjorie and the hell with her lawyer, I want to take my gorgeous girlfriend out for dinner. That is, if she’d like to go with me.”

“I would love that, thank you!” I told him with real enthusiasm,

“No, thank you,” he said. “I realized today after another exhausting and volatile conversation with Marjorie that you’re right. She's probably not going away any time soon. I’m going to try like hell to stop letting her get in the way of my life, of our life.”

I was ecstatic to hear it. We made plans to meet in Adam’s office later since we both still had piles of work to do. I called Nico and a paralegal named Sarah into my office and we spent the rest of the day working on Nelson’s case. Kyla came in later after I finished prepping for a real estate case I was working on. The message from Jack was put on the back burner

of my things to do list as I shuffled through motions and briefs and looked forward to my first public dinner with Adam that was not work related.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADAM

The rest of my day after I finally manned up and told Alicia I wanted to take her out to dinner flew by. It dawned on me all at once that I was sick to death of sneaking around like I was cheating on someone. My marriage with Marjorie had been over for years before we finally separated. We had been separated for six months before Alicia and I ever started seeing each other. We weren't doing anything wrong, and I was tired of feeling like we were. Besides, the thoughts I'd had this morning about Alicia getting tired of it all and leaving me had haunted me all day. It would crush me to lose her.

I was buried in paperwork when I finally pushed it back across the antique oak desk and decided to call it a night. So far, there were thirteen plaintiffs in the case against Brigham Oil, and the numbers grew daily. They were being sued by the EPA for unsafe practices, by several local fishermen that were claiming lost revenue over not being able to fish in the waters after the spill, by a representative of people from a village in the area that

were not able to drink the water, and the list went on. I had actually begun to worry that it may have been a mistake to take it on. But, tonight was about me and Alicia. I wasn't going to allow Marjorie or Brigham to ruin it for me.

My penthouse is on Fifth Avenue, quite a ways from the office. I keep suits at the office, though, so I grabbed one out of the closet and used the executive lounge to get ready for my night out with Alicia. She'd left me a message that she was leaving about an hour before. I felt a little silly at my age, but I was really excited about taking her out. It felt like a first date. At forty years old, I was damned lucky a young, beautiful woman like Alicia wanted me. I knew that I had to do this more often, she deserved it and if I didn't start, she'd find someone that would. I wanted her to finally be able to stop feeling like the "other" woman, although that was never really what she was.

When she opened the door to her apartment, my mouth went dry. I almost forgot how much I wanted to take her out and took her to bed instead. She had her auburn hair down and curled around her face. It brushed against her soft bare shoulders and the thin straps of the dark burgundy dress she was wearing. It was cut conservatively, but it accentuated every one of her hot curves. It stopped just above her knee and also showcased her long, shapely legs that ended in a pair of matching

stilettos on her small, sexy feet. I pictured them up on my shoulders in those shoes while I fucked her and my cock did a dance in my pants.

“Wow, you look amazing.”

She actually blushed. “Thank you, so do you.” When she turned to get her bag, I saw the back of the dress was wide open to her waist. I had no idea how I was going to keep my hands off of her in public half the night. We’d have to eat fast. She grabbed her bag and coat, and I put my hand against her bare back and led her into the elevator. It took every ounce of impulse control I could muster not to take her down and fuck her right there and again in the Lincoln Town car. I was actually almost relieved to see how busy Romaletti’s was. It would make me behave, at least.

Marco, the grandson of the original owner, came out to greet us. He was a client of our firm and ever since I had saved the restaurant from a bogus lawsuit a few years earlier that could have put them out of business, Marco treated me like a visiting dignitary when I came in. “Mr. Hanson, so very nice to see you,” he said in a thick Italian accent, “and who is this ravishing young lady?”

“Marco, this is my girlfriend, Ms. Alicia Winston,”

Marco took Alicia’s small hand in his large arthritic one and brought it up to his lips, kissing the back of it gently. With a bow, he said, “Welcome to my restaurant, Bella. Please, choose anything you would like from the

menu and I will make sure it is cooked to absolute perfection for you and Mr. Hanson, and tonight is my treat. Come,”

We followed him to a table across the room. In the center was a “Reserved” tag. It sat next to a large, picture window that looked out onto a small man made pond. Marco kept the pond stocked with gloriously-colored Koi fish and ducks and a gaggle of swan glided across its mirrored surface.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Alicia said as Marco held out her chair for her to be seated. She looked out on the pond and watched in fascination as the moonbeams danced off the surface and the colors of the Koi underneath glimmered like a rainbow.

“It’s my pride and joy,” Marco said before leaving us to get our waiter. He bowed at the waist once more before going and said, “If not for Mr. Hanson, it would have been lost to me. Please, enjoy yourselves tonight.” We thanked him again as he left and our waiter approached with a wine list right away.

I looked at it and then told Alicia, “I don’t know about you, but I’m in the mood for a real celebration tonight.”

She readily agreed, and I ordered a bottle of the restaurant’s best champagne. The waiter returned promptly with a bottle and two flutes. He filled Alicia’s and then mine and then handed us both a menu before setting

the bottle back in the brass ice bucket and leaving us to make our choices. I picked up my champagne glass, and holding it up in Alicia's direction, I said, "To us." She picked hers up and clinked it to mine and said,

"To us."

We sipped our champagne and after ordering our meals, we talked about Alicia's parents' upcoming visit to the States. It was so nice to be out in public with her and talking about things that had nothing to do with work at all. When our food came, we indulged in rich, homemade bread and the fabulous pasta and steaks that Marco had made just for us. Afterwards, even though we were both so bloated we could hardly move, we shared a piece of cheesecake.

Once we were both uncomfortably stuffed, we decided we needed to walk some of it off. Marco let us out the side door and we took a stroll around the pond in the moonlight. Alicia was as excited as a child as she pointed out the multi-colored Koi and the beautiful white swans. I smiled as I watched her pretty hazel eyes dance. I wanted to make her happy like that forever. She made me feel young again, and she was everything that I had always wanted in a woman.

I knew now that Marjorie had been a terrible mistake, and often wondered what had taken me so long to realize it. Marjorie is, was, and always will be a social climber whose name and position on the social

registry was more important to her than anything else. Standing here next to Alicia, watching her revel in the beauty and wonder of something as simple as a bunch of fish and some ducks, made me love her more than I had ever thought possible. Surprising even myself, I asked her,

“How do you feel about ice skating?”

“Really?” Alicia almost squealed. “I love to ice skate. I haven’t been for years!”

“Let’s go then,” I told her with a smile.

We went back inside to get our coats and thank Marco. I tried to pay our bill, but Marco said he would be insulted at the very thought of accepting my money. After helping Alicia on with her coat, I dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the table for the waiter and we stepped outside into the frigid cold November night. The driver had the seats of the car warmed and the heater on before we got in, so the ride to Rockefeller Center was warm and cozy. Alicia rode snuggled in the crook of my arm until the huge lighted tree came into view. She sat up and like a child at Christmastime, pressed her face to the window to look at it.

“I love the tree!” she exclaimed with pure delight. “When I was a girl, I used to watch the lighting of the tree on television with my mother. I just knew I’d live here someday when I grew up. Mother cringed every time I would mention it.”

“I’ll bet they miss you.”

Alicia turned to look at me. “They do, and I miss them so badly sometimes. But this place, New York, it’s in my blood now. I don’t think I could ever live anywhere else. I can’t wait to see my parents when they come to visit, though, and introduce them to you!”

“I hope they’re more pleased with your choice in men than they were with your choice of cities to live in.”

Alicia laughed and said playfully, “Me, too.”

The driver stopped near the ropes that framed the entrance to the frozen pond sitting in the shadow of the gigantic Christmas tree. Alicia and I made our way to the kiosk where we could rent our skates. On the way, I bought us a cup of hot chocolate from a vendor. “Are you warm enough?” I asked her.

“I’m freezing,” she said with a smile, “but I don’t care.”

I laughed and said, “Come on, let’s go stand by the bonfire while we drink this, maybe you’ll defrost a bit.” We stood near the roaring outdoor fire, sipping our chocolate and listening to the sounds of the live band that played near the Christmas tree and the people having fun all around us. I pulled Alicia up on her tip-toes and kissed her softly on the lips. “You ready?” I asked her.

“In a minute,” she said. She went back up on her toes and kissed me again. This one was longer, and deeper. “Okay,” she said, pulling back and leaving me breathless after a minute, “I’m warm now.”

I was just plain hot. She made my blood boil with desire every time she touched me. I tried to will my rising erection down as I took her by the hand and led her to a bench where we sat so we could put on our skates. There was a little stand nearby and I ran over to it quickly and bought her a pair of furry gloves and a scarf.

“Thank you,” she told me. “But what about you? You don’t have any gloves.”

“You’ll just have to keep me warm,” I told her. We finished putting on our skates, and I led her out on the ice. I hadn’t been skating in a long while, but it came back quickly. Alicia was doing well, too. We held hands and skated around the oval rink, watching the young children all bundled in their colorful parkas, falling down and getting right back up with a smile on their faces.

“This reminds me of a pond near the royal property back home. My father had permission from the crown to fish there. He took me skating there a few times when I was little.”

“Did you ever meet any of the royal family?”

“No. My mother is distant cousins with the queen, but too far removed for us to be considered ‘royals.’ Mum and Daddy still cling to the titles, though. It’s kind of embarrassing for me.”

“I wouldn’t be embarrassed by it. We have a right to be proud of our heritage, don’t you think?”

“I do, I just don’t like all the snobbery that comes along with it.”

It was amazing to me. A woman like Marjorie who came from practically nothing with an entitled and superior attitude and a woman like Alicia who had every reason to be a snob and wasn’t in the least.

We skated until we both had to finally admit our legs had probably had enough for one day. It was getting late, and we had both worked a long day. It was the best time I’d had in a long time, though, and as much as I wanted to get her home and make love to her, I was still reluctant to see it end.

When we were back in the cozy warmth of the car, she said, “I can’t even begin to thank you for tonight. I had such a good time.”

“I should be thanking you,” I told her.

“For what?”

“For being so patient with me this long and sticking around, and for giving the things I grew up looking at every day a fresh new look for me through your pretty eyes. Thank you, Alicia, I mean it. Tonight was great and we are going to have a lot more great times to come. I want to

experience everything I've never done and even things I have with you. You see the wonder in everything like a child, but yet here you are, a sexy, beautiful, intelligent woman. You're an enigma."

She laughed and said, "I've been called a few things in my time..." and then added, more seriously, "I want to see everything with you; I want us to see everything together."

I pulled her to me and we kissed passionately, finally coming up for air as the car pulled up in front of my building. The doorman opened the car door and helped Alicia out and held the door open for me as he greeted us both. He called the elevator down for us and said goodnight as he pushed the button for the top floor. Alicia and I kissed again in the elevator, and we were still kissing when the doors slid open. I walked us out backwards to the penthouse door and held her against it while I slid the key into the lock. I tried to turn it, but it wouldn't turn. What the hell? I tried it again, it was like I had the wrong key, but I knew this was the right one.

"Is something wrong?" Alicia asked.

"I'm not sure. My key isn't..." The door flew open, and Marjorie stood there in a silk robe and a diamond necklace that I'd bought her for our fifth anniversary.

"Can I help you?" she asked, smugly.

“Marjorie, what the hell is going on?” I felt the anger surging through my veins. I hated this woman with a passion. I despised myself for marrying her in the first place. The tight-faced bitch looked at Alicia, running her eyes down her disdainfully...how dare she? Marjorie looked back at me and in a nasty tone she said,

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but you’ll have to take your call girl to a hotel until you find a permanent place to live.”

“Damn it, Marjorie, get the hell out of my house, now.”

“Oh no, dear, you’re mistaken. It’s my home. I never actually moved my things out, remember? My lawyer tells me that gives me every right to be here now. So, the way I see it is, you can go to a hotel, stay with your whore, or you can live here with me until this is all decided in a court of law.” With that last insult, she swung the door closed in our faces. Alicia was pale as a ghost, and I was so angry it’s amazing the veins in my temples didn’t pop. Alicia put her hand on my arm and said,

“Come on, baby. We can stay at my place tonight and figure this out in the morning.”

I wasn’t thinking rationally, I was just so pissed off. I jerked my arm out of her grasp and said, “No!” too harshly. She looked shocked, and I instantly felt bad. Marjorie had just called her a whore, and I was the one

acting wounded. “I’m sorry, baby. It just makes me crazy. I can’t just walk away and leave her to claim my home.”

Alicia looked even more shocked. “You intend to stay here...with her?”

I took her face in my hands and said, “I need you to trust me, please.” She didn’t answer me and I knew I would play hell getting her to speak to me tomorrow. I couldn’t let Marjorie do this to me, though. I had earned this money. I had worked for it, not her. I took a deep breath and said, “The car will still be outside. Have him take you home. I’ll see you at the office tomorrow.” She turned around slowly like a zombie and headed for the elevator. I reached to push the button for her and she batted my arm away. She wouldn’t look at me and I knew I was probably crying. I felt like shit, but what was I supposed to do?

CHAPTER FIVE

ALICIA

Somehow, I made it upstairs to my apartment in a zombie-like fog after I left Adam. I stripped off my dress, hose, and shoes on the way to my bedroom. I didn’t even wash my face. I just crawled underneath the covers and slipped into a sleep filled with nightmares of attending Adam and Marjorie’s reunion party. I was dressed all in black, with what looked like

an old woman's hand-knit shawl draped carelessly over my shoulders. The Adam in my dream only took his eyes off of his impeccably-dressed wife once. That was to glance in my direction with disdain and something that resembled pity.

I woke to the alarm screaming loudly with the pillow over my face and the dream still playing in my head. I knew it wasn't real, but I couldn't help but remind myself the reason I'd dreamt it in the first place was because Adam had spent the night before with Marjorie.

I finally reached over and stopped the incessantly screaming alarm and forced my weary limbs out of the bed. I had to be in Judge Nolan's courtroom promptly at nine a.m., and from the feel of the left-over make-up crusted to my eyelid, it was going to take me a little more time than usual to get ready. I put on my morning coffee to brew and headed for the shower. As I passed my purse in the floor where I left it the night before, I realized it was ringing. I thought about just walking on by when I realized it was Adam's ringtone. Deciding I may as well get it over with before I saw him at work, I fished it out and answered it with a curt,

“Hello?”

“Good morning, baby,” he said, like nothing had ever happened. When I didn't say anything back right away, he asked, “How are you?”

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry as I asked, "How would you imagine I am, Adam?"

I heard him sigh, and knowing him so well, I pictured him rubbing his hand over his face and then dragging his fingers through his hair as he often did when he was anxious or upset.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am that Marjorie ruined our evening. I had a horrendous night, if it makes you feel any better." He gave a small laugh and then added, much more seriously, "Nothing would have made me happier than to have woke up next to you this morning." Again, I didn't say anything. "Baby, we will talk later, I promise. I just need you to keep in mind that she is trying to take everything from me that I have worked for my entire adult life. I cannot...no, I will not just sit back and allow that to happen. I'm sorry you are always caught in the middle of all of this. Truly, I am. I love you."

"I will try to keep it in mind. Now, however, I have to get dressed. I'm due in court in an hour, and I can't be late."

"Okay," he said. I could tell he was disappointed. He had probably hoped that his words alone would be enough to send my anger running, as usual. He was very good at talking. It was actually what he did best. He earned his living by phrasing things in just the right way. I wasn't buying it that easily this time.

“We’ll talk later.” Without saying anything further, I hung up.

I was good, as most lawyers are, at compartmentalizing things. I put my anger towards Adam in a box in the corner of my mind. The lid wasn’t shut tightly, and I knew the thoughts would seep out throughout the day, but I didn’t have time to let it consume me today. I had a client and two colleagues that were depending on me to give one hundred percent of myself today, and that is what I intended to do.

An hour later, I was rushing up the steps to the courthouse and nearly collided head-on with a man who was on his way down. He put out his arm to stop me from falling backwards, and when I looked up to thank him, I realized that I was looking into the emerald green eyes of my former lover, Jack Grant. “Oh my God, Jack?”

“Alicia! What an amazing coincidence bumping into you...literally. I actually left a message for you yesterday at your office.”

I smoothed down the edges of my skirt with my free hand and looking back up at Jack I said, “I know. I’m so sorry I hadn’t had a moment to get back with you yet.” I glanced at my watch and realized I didn’t have a moment now. “I have to apologize once more, I’m afraid. I’m due in court,

now, as a matter of fact. Is there a chance you might be free for lunch? We can catch up then.”

Jack smiled. I had almost forgotten how good looking he was. “Of course,” he said. “The sandwich shop across the street okay?”

“Perfect,” I told him. “I’ll see you around noon.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” he said with another dazzling smile. I swallowed the lump that had involuntarily formed in my throat and headed in to the courthouse. I rushed in to find that Kyla had already started. Nico and Nelson were seated at the defendant’s table, and Dawson and his assistant DA sat at the table opposite. Jury selection was in process, and I tried to slip into the chair next to Nico quietly so as not to alert Judge Nolan to my tardiness. He was a tough judge who was known for his lack of tolerance for things that slowed business down in any way in his court.

Nico handed me a list of potential jurors as I sat. He and his paralegal assistant had already done the hard work of putting them in groups by age, profession, and even race. When picking a jury, it was essential that everything that could possibly work for or against our client be taken into consideration. I smiled at him and mouthed, “Thank you.” I made eye contact with Nelson and smiled and mouthed, “I’m sorry I’m late.”

He nodded, and I turned my attention back to Kyla who was questioning juror number one. She was doing an excellent job, and I

allowed myself to take that time to try and pull myself together. I had to keep slamming the lid shut on the box in my brain that was supposed to be keeping the thoughts of Adam from consuming me all day. I consciously slowed my breathing and glanced at Nelson again. I reminded myself once again that his life, if not literally, was at least figuratively in our hands.

Kyla finished with the juror and took her seat on the other side of me as Dawson approached the bench. I also mouthed a “Thank you” in Kyla’s direction, and then added an “I’m sorry.” She gestured with her palm to show me it was not a huge deal and things were under control.

The rest of the morning was spent picking or contesting jurors. By lunchtime, both sides had agreed on only six jurors. The judge excused us, instructing everyone to be back at one-thirty. I couldn’t be positive, but thought that Judge Nolan may have looked in my direction as he added, “sharp” to the instructions. It was probably just my guilty conscience.

After I formally apologized to Nelson for being late and assured him it wouldn’t happen again, I told Nico and Kyla I was meeting an old friend for lunch. At Kyla’s quizzical look, I told her that we would talk later. I hurried across the street and found Jack waiting for me at a table near the door. He stood up when he saw me. I greeted him properly this time with a hug and a peck on the cheek.

He held me back with his arms and said, “You still look amazing.”

“And, you’re still a sweet-talker, but thank you. You look pretty amazing yourself.” Jack pulled out my chair and after I was seated, he took a seat himself.

“So,” I asked after the waitress had taken our order. “What in the world are you doing in New York?”

“Well, my father’s business dealings have made it across the pond, so I was assigned to follow them here. We’re currently in the midst of trying to get all of the legal aspects, such as patents and licenses. I guess Dad decided to take full advantage of having a lawyer in the family.”

I smiled. I recalled that Jack and his father’s relationship had always been tenuous at best. The Grants owned one of the largest and most lucrative textile companies in Europe. All of the Grant men before Jack had gone straight from college to the boardroom. Jack had decided instead to go to law school, which had greatly disappointed his father. It looked like maybe family guilt had won out, after all. Here sat Jack, thousands of miles from home, working for his family at last.

“Well, I for one, am glad they sent you here,” I told him. “It is wonderful to see you.”

“Yes,” he said with a grin. “There are definite advantages to working in New York, I am beginning to see.”

I saw something in his eyes that made me think maybe Jack was hoping for more than just a simple reunion between friends. I caught myself just as I was about to tell him about Adam. What were me and Adam, after all? If I wasn't sure myself, I doubted that I could explain it to someone else.

Instead, we launched into small talk about old friends and acquaintances. Jack told me that he ran into my parents often at social functions and that they always talked so proudly of all I had accomplished for myself. That was really nice to hear. I knew they loved me and were proud of me, but I also knew they both hoped I'd be married with a family by now.

“Your mother does add, every chance she gets, how disappointed she is that you and I didn't work out.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know Mother. She truly believes that I should be married and have two point four children by now. Although at my age she only had one, and the nanny was doing most of the raising.”

Jack gave a little laugh. “Yes, but if it weren't for our nannies, we may have never met.”

I had to laugh, as well. I thought back to the day Jack and I had officially met. We were both in kindergarten, and I had begged my nanny to take me to the park after my lessons one spring day. A little dark-haired boy with the greenest eyes that I had ever seen was on the swing next to me. My

nanny sat on the bench next to another lady about the same age, and they talked as if they knew each other. The boy looked at me and smiled. Instead of smiling back I said,

“You have dirt on your nose,”

The little boy had looked sad or offended, and he got off the swing as soon as he could stop it. He ran over to the ladies on the bench, and the woman that had been speaking with my nanny picked up his backpack and they walked away together. I also got off the swing and went over to my nanny.

“Do you know that boy?” I asked her.

“Yes, his name is Jack. His family is very well known around here. What did you say to him, Alicia?” my nanny asked. “He seemed upset.”

“I just told him he had dirt on his nose,” I said. “I didn’t know he’d be so sensitive.”

“Oh, Alicia, it’s not dirt. He was in a car accident when he was very small. They’ve been doing surgery after surgery on his face for years. His nose is one of the last places left where you can see the burns still. I’m afraid you hurt his feelings.”

I can still remember how sick I had felt in the pit of my stomach. I had never been one to be hateful to people for any reason. I had actually always wanted to defend people that others treated poorly. It was something I was

born with and a big part of why I had become an attorney. I had spent the next few days bugging my nanny Marie to take me to the boy so I could apologize. Marie had finally set up a meeting with Jack's nanny back in the park. As soon as I saw him, I had gone straight up to him and said,

“I want to apologize for my bad manners. I didn't realize you had an injury on your nose. I would have never said anything if I had.”

He took me by surprise with his broad smile. “It's okay. I went home and looked in the mirror that day. It actually made me happy that it only looks like dirt now. It's much better.” Jack and I had been friends from that day on. We were lovers years later and now here we sat, both of us grown and successful.

“I guess you're right,” I said to Jack. “If not for our nannies...” I let it lie there. We both knew that our times together were moments we would both hold in our hearts forever.

We launched into more talk about old times and people we both knew and before I knew it, the lunch hour was over and I had to get back to court. I gave Jack my cell number, and he said he would call later in the week. I embraced him again before I left. I had honestly missed my friend. I was glad to have him back. As I walked away, I glanced back at him. The look that he had as he watched me go made me think again, though, that I really should clarify my intentions the next time we met.

The rest of the day in court was more of the same. Jury selection, as important as it was, could be a tedious chore. Nico, Kyla, and I were all happy when by three p.m., both sides had agreed on two more jurors and one alternate. The trial could begin now, and the judge scheduled opening arguments for the following Monday morning.

Nico and Kyla had ridden in together that morning from the office, so I told them I would meet them back there.

As I drove into the lot where the associates and partners park, I saw Marjorie, again. She was getting out of the backseat of a black Mercedes. The door was being held open for her by the driver, and she was leaning in talking to a man inside. I recognized him as Hal Rogers. Hal owned a large law firm, Rogers, Stein, and Rogers, and they often went up against Adam and his lawyers in civil court. He was Marjorie's lawyer, and if Adam was right, her lover, as well.

I tried to walk by quickly without making myself obvious, but just as I approached the car, Marjorie looked up and noticed me.

“Hal, here she is! This is the girl that was draped on Adam's arm when he came home last night. Girl...oh, girl!” Marjorie yelled out rudely at me like she was calling to one of her servants. I ignored her and kept walking. I could hear her calling me until I got inside. Confrontation with Marjorie was not going to do neither me nor Adam any good at this point.

I opened the lobby doors and slipped quickly inside. I made my way back to my office with quick nods and smiles at the skeleton staff that was left in the building this late in the afternoon and slipped into my office. Once the door was closed behind me, I leaned against it and took several deep breaths to calm myself. I startled as I both felt and heard a knock on the door behind me. Thinking it was probably Carla, I turned and opened it. To my dismay it wasn't Carla, but Marjorie.

She pushed past me, not waiting to be invited in and said, "I tried to get your attention in the lot, did you not hear me?"

This woman was a real piece of work. "Oh, I heard you, yes. I'm sure everyone out there did. I do not, however, answer to 'Girl.'"

Marjorie smiled, or at least her face moved as much as her multiple plastic surgeries would allow it to. "I do apologize," she said insincerely. "I guess that was rude, wasn't it? I just can't for the life of me remember what my husband said your name was." I felt the knot in my stomach tighten at the word "husband," even though I was sure that upsetting me was Marjorie's intention.

"My name is Alicia. Alicia Winston. What exactly can I do for you, Mrs. Hanson?" I almost spat out the "Mrs." and it was obvious that Marjorie knew it.

“I just thought we should formally meet,” she said as she helped herself to a seat on the couch in my office. “After all, if you are going to continue sleeping with my husband, while he and I continue to try and settle our divorce, I’m sure we’ll be running into each other often.”

I felt my face grow hot. Marjorie’s only intention here was to get to me, and unfortunately she was accomplishing her goal.

“I fail to see who I, or Adam for that matter, sleep with as you put it, is any of your concern. Now if that’s all, I do have work to do.”

Marjorie stood and glanced around the office. “You do know, of course, that part of my settlement will include this law firm.” When I refused to engage her, she went on, “My first order of business when that happens will be to take out the trash.” Picking up her coat and leaving me fuming, she exited through the open door. I slammed it shut behind her...right on Adam.

“How long have you been out there?” I asked.

“Just long enough to see Marjorie breezing out,” he told me as he came in and closed the door. “What was that about?”

I sighed, “Does it really matter, Adam?” I asked, wearily. “She has planted herself in your life and grown roots. She does not intend to be removed until she has exactly what she wants. Either you are willing to give it to her, or you continue to live with her antics. I for one, do not have the time, energy, or desire for any of it any longer.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, seemingly genuinely confused.

“I am saying that until Marjorie is no longer part of your life, until she no longer has the right to call herself ‘Mrs. Hanson,’ I am finished with you and I. Talk to me when you’re done with her and we’ll see where we can go from there.”

Adam’s face was a mixture of anger and disbelief. “You act like I want to live with this crazy woman. She is making my life a living hell. I’ve been in meetings with oil barons and politicians all day to boot. I’m being portrayed in the media as a pariah for taking on this case, and now the one good thing in my life is about to walk away. Nice.”

I had been holding my temper back all day, but I finally couldn’t take it any longer. “Me, me, me! That is all I ever hear from you, Adam! What about me? What about what I went through last night knowing you were spending the night with your ‘wife?’ What about what I went through just now enduring that woman’s nastiness? At least you bear some responsibility for what is happening in your life. Mine is falling apart as collateral damage. You act like I just gave up on us. I have stuck this out for nearly a year, feeling like the other woman when in truth, I was doing nothing wrong. And now, nearly a year later, I am truly the other woman because here you are living with your wife all over again!”

Adam sighed and rubbed his temples. “I can’t just let her have it all. I can’t.”

“Then you keep fighting, Adam. You do what you have to do, and I’ll do what I have to. Right now, what I really need to do is get to work on my case at hand. There is a young man depending on me and I will not throw his life away because I am too wrapped up in my personal issues to do the best job possible for him.”

Adam nodded and left, just like that. I wasn’t sure what I expected. He was headstrong and arrogant. I had known that from the start. I didn’t really blame him for not wanting to give Marjorie what was rightfully his, what he had earned. I just honestly didn’t have the strength to be a part of it any longer. I had a horrible thought then, one that I pulled right back down into that dark, dusty box in the corner of my brain that I rarely allowed open.

“I wish the bitch would just disappear off the face of the earth.”

CHAPTER SIX

ADAM

I had the worst day that I remembered having in a very long time. I stayed late at the office not because I had so much work to do, but because I hated the idea of being alone with Marjorie. When I finally forced myself

out of the building, I was assaulted right outside on the sidewalk by the bright flash of a camera and a microphone in my face.

“Mr. Hanson, do you have any statements regarding the death of the President’s campaign manager and his link to Miles Brigham IV?”

My breath caught in my throat – Vick Landon dead? I had no idea what the reporter was talking about. Vick couldn’t be dead. He’s young and healthy...unless there was an accident. Why would he be asking me, anyways? Vick was more Alex’s friend from the start. Or maybe it was more about our common associates. It suddenly dawned on me that he was asking me because of my association with Brigham Oil and their association with Vick and this political campaign. Shit.

Realizing that I was surrounded by reporters and they were all yelling questions at once, I held up a palm to silence them. I saw Alicia leave the building out of the corner of my eye. She stopped at the edge of the crowd. I wanted to go to her and make her understand this bullshit with Marjorie, but that would have to wait until later. I addressed the reporters as soon as they were quiet.

“I’m afraid, first of all, that you are talking to the wrong person here. Yes, I am the attorney of record for the Oil Company, and yes, we are connected to the President’s campaign financially. However, I didn’t know

Vick very well and I'm not sure how I can help you here. I didn't even know he had died, and so I have no idea how it happened."

"He was murdered," one of them called out.

"He was bludgeoned to death," another one said.

Before I opened my mouth again Mac, my partner and my personal attorney, stepped out of the building. He leaned in close to my ear and said, "You know better than to talk to these vultures. Miles is here, let's go."

Before I even knew what was happening, I was ushered into Miles Brigham's smoke gray limousine, the door was slammed shut, and we were pulling away from the curb. The last thing I saw outside the building was Alicia still standing there and looking confused. I didn't blame her. I was confused myself.

I asked my assistant Mary to send Alicia into my office as soon as Alicia got in the next morning. I was working on a brief when I heard a tap on the door and it was pushed open. "Mary said you wanted to see me," Alicia said. I could tell by the red in her eyes that she hadn't had much rest. The look on her face also told me I was probably the last person she wanted to see this morning. I knew I was dangling precariously close to losing her; I just wasn't sure I knew how to fix it.

“Yes, thanks for coming,” I said, trying to go into boss mode and forget for a few minutes how much I loved her and how badly I wanted her.

“Please, sit.” I stood and motioned at a chair, and instead of sitting back down behind my desk I sat in the other wing-backed chair opposite her.

“I suppose you heard what happened last night?”

“Yes, I couldn’t miss it. It’s all over the news, and there are reporters all over outside. It’s still hard to believe.”

“There are also federal agents here, unfortunately,” I told her.

“FBI?” she asked.

“Yes. They are with Mac right now. They believe that Brigham had something to do with Vick’s murder. Mac is trying to get out of them exactly what we have, but I don’t think he’ll have much luck. Our only goal in being here is to make sure his attorneys are aware he is a person of interest, so our case doesn’t fall apart somewhere along the line for not following the letter of the law.”

“Adam, do you think Brigham had anything to do with it?”

I hesitated as I decided how to phrase my answer. I wasn’t trying to keep things from Alicia. I didn’t want to alarm her needlessly, either. Finally, I said, “He denies it, and we are his attorneys, so it really doesn’t matter anyways, does it?”

“What do you need from me?” Alicia asked, knowing that I was leading somewhere by telling her this. I felt an ache in my chest. I wanted to tell her what I needed from her, on all levels. Instead, I made myself focus on the task at hand and said,

“I need you to hand all of your open cases over to Kyla and Nico, and I need you to take on the criminal portion of this case. Mac and I will continue to represent the oil company, but I need you to represent Brigham, whether or not he ends up being arrested. There are going to be a lot of interviews with police and FBI, not to mention the press conferences. I need you on that; you can have as many of the junior associates and paralegals as you need to help.” Alicia looked dumbfounded. She knew how good I thought she was at her job, but she was also still new. I just hoped I wasn’t putting too much on her.

“Why me?”

“You have the most criminal experience of us all, Alicia. Our forte here was corporate and domestic before you, Nico, and Kyla came on board. You are all good, but I believe you are the best we have. Brigham is our number one client. We can’t afford to hand him over to someone that doesn’t know what they’re doing. Also,” I hesitated again before going on to say, “the authorities are bound to turn up some things in our investigation of Brigham that we would prefer the public and even some of our firm not know about.

I believe I can trust you to do what needs to be done to keep certain things out of the press.”

She nodded. I could tell that she wasn't absolutely convinced that she was experienced enough to handle a case of this magnitude, but my mind was made up that she was the one I wanted. She finally said, “Okay, where do I start?”

“You're having breakfast with Miles Brigham IV in about two hours at his home. He can tell you what he knows, and you, as his attorney can tell him what, if anything he can tell the authorities.”

“Okay,” Alicia said as we both stood up. “I'll get familiar with his file in the meantime.”

“No, there's no time for that now. Brigham's estate is upstate. You will be going straight to the airport from here. His private jet will pick you up in about forty-five minutes, and you will be driven from the landing strip to his estate.”

“My head is spinning a little bit here, Adam.”

“I know it's a lot to take in all at once, and I'm sorry. We have to be proactive here and get ahead of the press and the FBI, if possible.”

She nodded. Her auburn hair shone underneath the fluorescent lights of my office, and I wanted to just bury my face in it and forget about

everything. I knew there was no time for that – and there was also the chance that she might not want me to touch her right now.

“Alicia.” She turned to look at me and the desire to touch her practically overwhelmed me. She locked those gorgeous hazel eyes into mine and waited. At last I said, “Marjorie and I go to court on Monday. Hopefully, that part of my life will be over soon. Please, don’t give up on me just yet.”

She only nodded again. I was hoping for more than that, but the truth was, I knew it was more than I deserved after all I had put her through. She was much more patient than most women would have been and much more patient than myself. She closed the door behind her as she left, and I could only hope that she wouldn’t close the door on us just yet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALICIA

I once again tucked away my thoughts about Adam and me and set out to meet the man that was the subject of every news brief in America right then. Brigham’s plane was extravagant, to say the least. I was the only passenger, yet the jet was fully staffed. I was offered food, coffee, juice, tea,

and even a champagne mimosa. I chose the coffee, and then asked for a few moments of privacy so I could familiarize myself with Miles Brigham IV.

His file was thick. Adam's people had done their job well. Adam had investigators on staff whose only job was to gather as much background as possible on prospective clients. Adam believed that the more you knew about a person, the better you could represent them.

Brigham's file went all the way back to his birth. He was born to mega-wealthy parents, who had also been born to wealthy parents, and so on and so forth. The Petroleum Company had been in the family for over a hundred years. Miles IV had inherited it earlier than most of his predecessors. On the eve of his twenty-fifth birthday, his parents were both killed in a single engine plane accident. They had been flying out to New York from Texas for his birthday party. Miles IV was young, but his entire life had been spent in preparation for the day he would take over the company. He was what the financial community referred to as a "whiz kid," taking the profits up and over where any other oil company had ever gone. There was speculation amongst Federal Authorities and financial wizards that all of Miles IV's business dealings were not exactly legal, but if there were any hard evidence of that, it was yet to be found.

Miles IV had been married four times. His most recent ex-wife had only been 22 years old when he married her. She was 23 when she divorced

him. What brains the man had for business was lost when it came to love. At 54 years old, he had given hundreds of millions of dollars of his and his family's fortune to ex-wives. His attorneys had always urged him to get a prenuptial agreement prior to marrying them, as did his children, both of whom were now grown and rightfully concerned that if their father continued his liaisons with these types of women, there would be no inheritance left for them.

Miles began to get into politics about five years ago. From what I had read thus far, it seemed to me that his choice was based on a cross between boredom with his everyday activities and needing more places to put his money in order to keep the IRS from taking huge chunks.

Vick Landon had approached him almost four years prior after meeting at a democratic rally and spoke to him about the benefits of investing in the American president. The President was just a hopeful at the time, but Vick had said that with the right financial backers, he could go all the way and do great things for this country. Alicia wasn't certain if the country was Miles IV's main concern or not, but it would seem he decided there was something great enough there for someone that he invested hundreds of millions of dollars into the president's campaign. Thanks to that support, the presidential hopeful was able to put on a campaign that outdid all of his

competition and convince the constituents that he was the right man to restore financial order to America once again.

Vick shot to the top of political circles quickly after that. If not for him, the President may have never received enough funding to get where he was. Miles Brigham IV was always welcome at the White House, and to the chagrin of some of the President's close advisers, he was perhaps more involved in policy making than he should have been.

Adam's good friend Alex Fritz was a close friend of Vick's. They ran in the same circles, and it was through Alex that Adam had made the contact with Brigham, and our business relationship was born.

As I read through the file, I made note that Mr. Brigham had also been implicated in many crimes over the years, none of which amounted to an arrest, much less a conviction. Being accused of things was one thing – proving it was something else entirely. Miles Brigham IV had the money and the connections to pay the best lawyers, and in some cases, evidence and even people just disappeared.

Brigham's most controversial problem had taken place almost ten years prior, when his third wife, thirty-two-year-old Kelly Brigham, a former topless dancer and self-proclaimed cosmetic surgery addict "fell" off of a cliff while hiking in the hills with her husband. Police and press were suspicious, due to the facts that for one, Kelly Brigham was not an

outdoorsy type of girl, secondly, many people had overheard her and Miles IV arguing loudly earlier in the day, and finally, a busboy in the restaurant at the lodge where the couple had been staying had reportedly overheard Miles IV telling Kelly that she should “watch herself” because people “disappeared off the sides of cliffs in this place all the time.”

The problem with their case was: Kelly’s family, who consisted only of her crack-addict mother and her drug dealer brother stood in Miles IV’s corner and told all who would listen what an amazing husband he had been to Kelly and how he had “turned her life around.” The police suspected a payoff there, *You think?*, but again, could prove nothing.

The people that had said they heard the argument in the lobby of the lodge that day either recanted their stories, saying they “must have been mistaken” or left no forwarding addresses in which the police and district attorney could track them down. The busboy from the restaurant was one of the people who had “left town.” No one at the lodge knew where he may have gone, and the police had been unable to track him down.

I sat the thick file down, yawned, and stretched out my legs. I poured myself a glass of water from the fresh pitcher the attendant had left me a bit ago and mulled over what I had just read. The biggest question on my mind was the one question I would never ask Mr. Brigham. “Is he a murderer?”

I pictured Miles Brigham IV. I had met him once and had seen him coming and going many times at the office. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man. His gray hair was stylishly cut to just above the collar of his shirts. He rarely wore a suit. Instead, he wore famous brand shirts and designer jeans. I had not ever really noticed his shoes, but he struck me as a cowboy boot kind of man. I had a hard time picturing this man tossing his wife off of a cliff or bludgeoning a man to death. I knew, though, that looks are very often deceiving and recalled what Adam had said earlier about it not mattering if he was guilty or not. I knew that. My job was to give Miles IV the best defense possible. Innocence or guilt was for a jury to decide, not me.

My plane landed on that thought, and I filed away my concerns about whether or not Mr. Brigham had killed his wife, tucking them away for later. When I stepped off the plane, I saw that the great man himself was waiting to meet me. He stood at the bottom of the steps of the ramp, his long, black limousine parked alongside him. He smiled a wide, welcoming smile as I descended.

"Ms. Winston, I presume?" he asked as he offered a hand to help me down the last few steps. I smiled back and took his outstretched hand with my free one.

"Yes, Mr. Brigham, thank you."

"We have met before, haven't we?" He motioned to his driver to retrieve the bag I carried. "I recall seeing you several times afterwards. I regret that we never had time to get to know one another."

"Well, I am looking forward to working with you," I told him as the driver held the door to the car open for us. "And, thank you for the amazing ride here. That had to be the smoothest flight I've ever been on."

Brigham laughed and said, "I reckon I'm a bit spoiled. I can't even remember the last time I flew commercial."

We both slid into the roomy backseat of the car. Brigham offered to pour me a drink as the driver began the journey. I wasn't much of a drinker and wanted a clear head for our work this evening so I declined and accepted a sparkling water, instead.

"So, Mr. Brigham, if you don't mind, tell me what has happened thus far."

Miles sighed loudly. "This is all so unnecessary. I have done many things, young lady, but I assure you, murder is not one of them."

I gave him a reassuring smile and nodded, but I couldn't help remembering what I had read about his third wife. I shook that off and said,

"Our goal here, Mr. Brigham, is to avoid your arrest completely. I need you to tell me anything and everything you know about Vick and whatever you may know about who or why someone would want to murder him. I

also need to know why the police would think you would be involved in this."

"Well, for starters, I hated that little rat bastard. When I feel a certain way about someone, I tell them straight out. I told him more than once. I'm afraid I told him in front of more than one person. I think I even used the words once that the little SOB should be wiped right off the face of the earth."

I winced. We would have to work on the way he phrased things if this ever went to court.

"I didn't mean that, literally. I just say things when I get angry, and I don't think about how they sound or even who may be listening. It's given me cause for the services of many a good lawyer over the years."

He said the last with a small chuckle as he drained the contents of his glass. I was not shocked to see him chugging bourbon so early in the day. His penchant for loose, busty women was no match for his penchant for alcohol, and the press had played them both up in more ways than either of them could count. I continued on with my interview,

"Do you mind telling me why you loathed Vick so much?"

As he poured another snifter of scotch, he said, "I met Vick when he was nothing but a snot-faced kid with a lot of big dreams. He was smart, I'll give him that, and I was impressed with the boy's tenacity. He had gotten a

job working on the President's campaign right out of college. He worked every angle there was to get donors for the campaign, including me. Did you know that I am the reason he got the job as the campaign manager? He finagled a promise from the President's right hand man that if he could get me on board, the job was his."

Miles laughed again, but there was little humor in it. "He started out trying to work me the way he did everyone else. He gathered as much background on me and my company as he could, and tried to work the 'I'll get him to back every law and proposition that you want passed' angle. I told him straight out that I had enough money and enough friends in high places that I tended to get what I wanted, either way.

"Then, the steel-balled little bastard...excuse my language, I'm not used to speaking with ladies that often. Anyways, he did something that surprised me. He just came straight out and told me about the promise he had received to be the President's campaign manager. I was impressed with that, I have to say. Hell, I was gonna give my money to somebody, right? Gotta keep those tax write-offs piling up. So, I agreed, Vick got the job, and the rest as we say, is history."

I waited a moment for him to go on, and when he didn't, I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Brigham, but that doesn't really explain why you hated him."

Brigham cracked the window slightly and then turned to me and said, "We are just about to my place. I have a few meetings this afternoon I just can't get out of, but I've set up the library for you with all the documents you need to go over pertaining to my business dealings with Vick. I would appreciate it, if you don't mind so much, if we continue that conversation over dinner later?"

"Of course," I agreed. I was disappointed. I had thought I would be able to spend the day gaining what I needed from Miles in order to stave off the police and FBI. I doubted that I would be able to get that from reviewing financial documents. He was the client though, and I was on the clock. That made him the boss for now, and I'd have to do it his way.

When I stepped out of the car, I felt like I had stepped right into a fantasy. The mansion stood before us, framed by lush green lawns stretching out for what seemed like miles. Trees and flowers were everywhere, and the largest, most breathtaking fountain flowed and bubbled with clear, cool water. The front of the home was supported with huge, white pillars and an oak balcony framed the upper floor. My family was well-off and I grew up in a really nice estate, but our entire home would have fit in his enormous front yard.

"It's lovely," I told him as he helped me out of the car.

Brigham looked up at the house and said simply, "It's home."

The entryway was just as grand. The floors were white and soft gray marble. An elegant chandelier hung from a vaulted ceiling and cascaded prisms of light across the spiral staircase that laid to the right of it. A smartly-dressed lady with her hair held back tightly in a bun greeted us at the door. Brigham introduced her as "Hannah" he told me that she was in charge of the household and that I should let her know if I needed anything.

He took Hannah off to the side for a moment and gave her instructions that I couldn't quite hear. He then told me again that he "just couldn't get out of" these meetings he had to go to, and to please help myself to any of the documents he had lain out for me in the library.

With that, he said goodbye and left me alone in the mansion, with Hannah of course. She showed me to the library, and after showing me where everything was that I might need, she left to make me a pot of tea.

I sighed, took off my jacket, and got to work sorting through all of the documents. At some point, Hannah returned with the tea and some cookies. My cell phone rang a few times, but I chose to ignore it. I surprised myself by becoming engrossed in the task before me. I had been concerned about spending the day trying to stay awake over the boring documents I would have to read. Instead, I had been handed a yellow legal pad by Hannah when I first sat down. She had told me to read it carefully, and then go through the documents as the instructions stated. I was intrigued.

Vick Landon, thirty-six years old. 1865 W. 15th Ave. New York (555) 565-7874.

Priscilla Moore, twenty-four years old, Vick's lover.

Cindy McGuire, twenty-six years old, Vick's girlfriend.

David Tyler, twenty-two years old, Vick's lover?

The last statement had a question mark behind it. I raised an eyebrow, David? Was that a man or a woman with a man's name?

I read on. The list contained dates, times and places where he had been with each of these people. It looked like the girlfriend was the only one he was ever seen in public with. She came from a prominent, wealthy family in Manhattan. They spent a lot of time together at fundraising events and social gatherings for the elite.

The lover, Priscilla, was a stripper in a club that Vick and his friends frequented. She had eventually moved into a deluxe suite at the Plaza, and Vick visited her at least twice a week, sometimes more often. In between his visits, Priscilla visited spas and elegant boutiques where she spent excessive amounts of cash.

And then there was David, definitely a man. Vick visited him once a week. They met at David's apartment in SoHo, and according to the document laid out before me, Vick was leading a very active sex life of which David was a part of.

I leaned back in the chair and rubbed my eyes. Suddenly, a deep red rose on a long stem appeared before my eyes. I looked behind me, and there was Adam, dressed to kill and looking like a million bucks. I pulled my chair back from the table.

"Adam! What are you doing here?" He smiled that smile that could defrost my heart and all of the blood in my body, had I ever been in a deep freeze for too long.

"Being the attorney of record for Miles Brigham IV has many benefits."

I felt light-headed and confused as I stood up and continued to gaze at him. My heart and every other fiber in my body was screaming at me to run into his arms. My head was trying, as usual, to overpower all of my other senses and make me listen to reason.

"Again," I said, enunciating it for effect, "what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. I need you, baby. I can't work; I can't sleep. Marjorie is killing me – literally, I think. I need you. You are truly the only good thing in my life right now. Please, don't send me away."

"We can't just have a tryst in the country and act like things are all wine and roses, Adam."

"I know that, I do. But, I told you I have the court date on Monday, right? I think this will finally be the last one, I can feel it. Please... Alicia... I need you..." He held his arms open, and I didn't waste any more time

allowing my brain to argue. I followed my heart and drifted like steel to his magnet. I threw my arms around his neck, and after a long, seductive kiss I said,

"Just for today, since we're both here..."

Adam smiled again, and any doubt I may have had that I wanted to do this was instantly erased. He picked me up in his arms as he continued to kiss me and pulled the door to the library open with his shoe. He carried me down the long hall, knowing just where he was going. When we reached the last door on the right, he opened it and we were suddenly in a spacious, plushly decorated bedroom.

As he sat me down on the pillow-soft king-sized bed, I had to ask, "Did you plan this with Miles? Is that why he dumped me here and went off to his meetings?"

Adam nodded. He lit a scented candle on the bedside as he stripped out of his tie and jacket. Picking up a remote that also lay there, he pushed a button and soft, contemporary music began to float throughout the room from invisible speakers.

"Hannah was in on it, too. I had to have some time alone with you. Miles really did have meetings to attend today. He'll be back for dinner and we will work, I promise. Right now though, I have to ravage you."

He leaned in for another kiss and began unbuttoning my blouse. As he sat next to me, he worked the buttons with one hand and slipped the other inside. He ran his fingers along the lace of my bra, gently touching the skin on the tops of my breasts and sending little electric shocks racing through me and goosebumps racing down my spine. When my shirt was fully unbuttoned, he slipped it off my shoulders, kissing each one as he did. The bra was suddenly unfastened, and my breasts spilled out and he let out a little moan before using his lips and tongue to set my nipples on fire. I ran my hands through his hair and pulled down gently on his head, urging him on.

As he sucked on my breasts, he pushed me back gently until I was lying flat on the bed. He continued to lick and suck and nibble, while he began to unfasten and slide my skirt down over my thighs. His fingers were skimming the edges of my panties, teasing in just the right places. I lifted my hips and allowed him to slip them off of me, as well. My pussy was soaked and aching for him. Each time I thought about leaving him, I had to wonder if I'd ever be okay with any other man's touch. I doubted it. I'd miss everything about him if this didn't work out. I might have to remain celibate for the rest of my life and that would suck.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

ADAM

"You have on too many clothes," Alicia told me in a breathless voice.

All I could manage was a grunt, but I began to work on removing my own clothing. I kept my tongue busy on her sexy body and when I was finally naked, I rolled on my back and Alicia climbed up and straddled me. She started kissing my neck. Breathing in deeply, she said, "God, I love the way you smell. It's so...I feel silly saying this, but it's so masculine."

I laughed. "Good to know," I breathed out as she kissed her way down my stomach.

When she reached my throbbing erection, she took it in her hand and looked up at me as she began slowly stroking it up and down. She made sure I was watching as she let her tongue come out and lick across the tip of it. She swirled it around the head before she opened up her sexy lips and engulfed it. I let out a long moan as she sucked me all the way back into the back of her throat. Then, she pulled her head while continuing to hold my cock firmly in her hand. She took the time to lick the head again before

repeating the whole thing, this time letting my cock linger in the back of her throat as she worked the muscles there a few times. Fuck, it felt good.

She took her time at first, but as we both got more excited, she began to bob her pretty head up and down faster and stroke and suck me harder. I felt my balls tightening up, and it took all of my willpower to keep from coming already. I didn't want her to stop. It was too good. I made myself hold back for a while longer until my head felt like it was about to explode all over the wall, and then I reached for her.

She let her soaking wet pussy slide up my body and tried to stop over my cock. I used my strength to pull her up further until that sweet, wet pussy was over my lips. I stuck my tongue out and slid it up inside of her warm tunnel. I loved the way she tasted, the way she felt, and the way she smelled. I loved everything about her.

I moved my tongue in and out of her, stopping occasionally to lick across her clit just to hear her moan. She rubbed it against me, and I could feel how hot and swollen it was. I sucked it into my mouth and she tried to pull up off of my face. I held her down with a grip on her hips and for several long minutes, I did my best to drive her crazy. From the sounds she was making, I was doing a good job.

"I need you inside of me," she said in a breathless voice. I let go of her and when she slid back down into my lap, I sat up and moved her over onto

the bed.

“Get on your hands and knees, baby.” She licked her lips and turned over. I positioned myself behind her and held my rock hard cock in my hand, teasing her with it until she was practically begging for it before I let it slide inside of her. She enveloped me like a glove, and I reached down and took a handful of her hair on one side and a breast in the other hand. I held her like that, tugging gently on one and pinching and twisting the other as I pounded her from behind.

Alicia had two full-blown orgasms before I finally felt my body tightening up and I couldn't hold back any longer. Every time with her was like the first time, and I came hard and ended up a sweaty, shaking pile of exhaustion when I collapsed down on top of her.

When I could talk again without shaking and gasping for breath I said, “Fuck that was amazing.”

She rolled over and wiggled out from underneath me. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair was disheveled, and she had a gorgeous smile on her face. I pulled her into my arms and held her. For the next few hours, we didn't talk about work, we didn't discuss Marjorie, or what we were going to do about our relationship, we just spent the time loving each other, and appreciating the fact that we had this time together. Unfortunately, about

five o'clock, my cell dinged with a message. I looked at it and saw that it was from Miles,

“Headed up the driveway, dinner will be in the formal dining room at six.” I texted him back that we would be there and told Alicia,

“I’m afraid it’s time, love. Hannah will have dinner on the dining room table in an hour.”

She wrinkled her little nose. “If I pout, can we skip dinner and keep having our dessert, instead?”

I smiled. “If you only knew how badly I would love that.” I kissed her and continued, “But no, I’m afraid that Brigham, and for that matter Hannah, too, are both just headstrong enough to come and forcibly drag us to the table. We better get busy showering and dressing for dinner.”

“Showering...oh my goodness, I didn’t bring any other clothes. Is it a formal dinner? Will he be expecting me to be dressed up? I thought it was a working dinner.”

“Calm down, gorgeous. Your amazing man is always prepared,” I told her with a grin. Bouncing out of the bed and strutting naked over to the armoire, I flipped open the door and hanging there was the elegant black cocktail dress that I’d had sent over in her size from a boutique I knew she liked to shop at. They knew her well and they’d also sent over shoes and

undergarments. “You’ll find the new underwear and bras in the drawers,” I told her. “Now, chop-chop; we don’t want to be late.”

“I haven’t been spoiled like this in...well, except by my parents, ever. Thank you! I feel like a princess.” She got up and gave me a big hug. I tried to follow her in the shower and she said, “Uh-uh. This gigantic castle has to have more than one. If you get in here with me, I’ll never get ready.” She had a point, but I was still disappointed.

“Okay, but we haven’t done the shower thing in a long time, you owe me one,” I told her.

I reluctantly left and went to the bathroom down the hall to get ready. An hour later, I met her in the hall. She looked gorgeous, as usual, and the things they’d sent over for her fit perfectly. “I’m glad I found you,” she said. “I have no idea where the dining room is.”

“I’m glad I ran into you, too. I needed another one of these.” I pushed her back into the wall and put my hands on that little silk dress she was wearing. I was so tempted to rip it off of her and fuck her right there up against the wall. I was good, though. I gave her a long, deep kiss and let her up for air before saying, “Tonight, I’m going to have you every which way.”

She giggled. “I can’t wait,” she said. I loved her enthusiasm, too.

When we made it downstairs to the formal dining area, Miles was already seated at the head of the table. To his right sat his son. He looked

like Miles IV minus about twenty-five years. To his left was a young woman. I assumed it was his daughter, but I'd never met her. She looked annoyed to be there. Next to her was Alex, my best friend and our political contact at the moment.

“Well, there y'all are,” Miles said as we walked in. “Have a seat, I'll introduce you.”

We sat down and Miles said, “This young man is my son, Miles V. My daughter, Celia, and you folks already know Alex?”

Alicia told Miles V and Celia that she was pleased to meet them and said hello to Alex. Miles V was polite, but Celia sat sulking like a spoiled child waiting to be excused. Hannah came in then and began serving soup. The group was quiet as we ate. When Miles IV had finished his, he looked at Celia and said,

“Celia, now is probably a good time to get this over with.”

“Daddy, I really don't need to be the one to tell them. Why don't you do it, please?”

I could tell by the way that Celia looked at Miles – she was used to getting her way. Miles V rolled his eyes in a very subtle way, but I caught it, nonetheless.

“Baby girl,” Miles IV said in a soft tone, “I really think we need to hear it from you...please.”

Celia sighed. She picked up the flute in front of her and drained the wine from it before she began. “I met Vick Landon at a fundraising rally two years ago. I was there with Dad and my boyfriend, David. Vick was very personable and charming. He and David seemed to have a lot in common, and by the end of the day we were chatting like old friends. I feel so stupid now; I really didn’t see it...”

She looked up then, in Alicia’s direction and asked, “Did you read Daddy’s file? The one with Vick’s disgusting sexual exploits?”

I felt bad for her, and I could tell by the look on Alicia’s face that she did, too. Only moments ago, I’d judged her as spoiled and selfish. Alicia nodded and took a sip of her water to lubricate her dry throat. “Yes, I did,” she said.

With a deep breath, Celia went on, “Then you know, they became more than friends. Daddy tried to get me to stop seeing him without telling me why. I wouldn’t accept his advice. I wish I would have listened now. I’d rather not have known. Anyways, my disgusting boyfriend was having a sexual affair with this man, and we have pictures to prove it.”

I could tell that Alicia didn’t know what to say. She finally said, “I’m sorry,” but the words hung in the air hollowly until Hannah came in with the main course and Miles IV broke the silence.

“Now you know why I hated the son of a bitch. There were other things also. Things you can read about in the files, too. For one thing, that whore that he set up at the Plaza was living off of stolen money, money that rat bastard had stolen from me, money that was intended to go towards electing a President.”

Alicia looked at me. I’d already been told all of this by Miles, but it was new and shocking information to her. I reached over and took her hand in her lap and squeezed it.

She looked at Alex then who had sat silently through all of this. I could tell Alicia was wondering why he was here. She was too tactful to ask at the table, but I’m sure she would the second we were alone.

Her eyes scanned the table, and I saw them land on Miles V. I could almost hear the wheels turning in that intelligent brain of hers. He was the only one eating, and he was doing so with a gusto that implied he was completely oblivious to his sister’s pain or his father’s anger. Miles IV had his eyes on his son too and they held a look of disdain. His eyes softened when he looked back at his daughter. He put his hand on hers and said,

“You did a good job, baby. You can go now if you like.”

Celia smiled and jumped up from the table like a child that was excused without eating her vegetables. I could tell by her waif-like appearance that it probably wasn’t the first meal she had missed. The girl planted a kiss on her

father's cheek and said goodnight to everyone, except her brother before bouncing out of the room.

I looked back at the younger Brigham, who seemed to not have missed a bite. I glanced at Alicia and she was looking at me with a look that practically screamed, "What have you gotten me into here?"

We finally all began to eat. Dinner was delicious, and thankfully, the rest of it was spent in pleasant small talk and conversation. I think we had heard enough for now regarding the scandalous nature of the people we worked for and their associations. There would be time later for more.

After dessert, Miles V excused himself and the rest of the party followed the elder Brigham into the sitting room. Hannah had his Bourbon ready, and both Alex and I both accepted a snifter, as well. Alicia chose sparkling cider. She rarely drank, save for the occasional glass of wine with dinner or champagne celebration. I could tell she was impatient as Miles IV talked on and on about his passion: big game hunting. I don't think he was finished, but he made the mistake of pausing for breath and Alicia interjected,

"Alex, if you don't mind my asking, what is your connection to all of this?"

Alex looked at me, as if looking for permission to divulge information to her. I saw her bristle at that. If she was going to be the lead defense

attorney in this case, she would need to learn how to get past hurt feelings and outright command more respect.

I nodded slightly at Alex. He looked back at her and said, “Miles has been grooming me as Vick’s replacement for a while now. We were going to make the announcement after Vick had been given the news. There was a press conference scheduled for Friday to announce his resignation and my appointment. Now, I assume, it will just announce my appointment in the wake of this, uh...tragedy.”

Miles IV nodded and then drained another shot of Bourbon. Sitting down his glass, he said, “Yes, Alex here is up to speed on all things Brigham and Presidential, so to speak. He’s going to make an excellent campaign manager, as well as a valuable ally for my company.”

“So, there was a plan in the works to fire Vick?” she asked

“Yes, little lady, that was the plan,” Brigham said

“And, you expected him to resign once you told him about it?” she asked, I knew she would put it all together quickly. She’s one of the smartest people I know. The only small area she was lacking was in her confidence.

“That was also the plan,” he said while lighting a cigar,

“Let me ask you all this,” Alicia said, looking at each of the men individually before speaking, “How many other people, besides those of us

in this house, knew what was going on with Vick? By that, I mean, the love affairs, the illicit spending sprees of campaign monies, and the fact that he was perilously close to losing it all?”

We all looked at each other and I finally told her, “We don’t know, exactly. The affairs weren’t well disguised by any standards. The stripper was only a plaything to Vick, she was interviewed by our people, and we believe she really didn’t know anything about what Vick was up to. As long as he paid her bills and allowed her shopping sprees, she gave him what he wanted in the sack when he wanted it and didn’t ask any questions. Cindy McGuire is being heavily protected, of course, by her family and refuses to have a conversation with us about Vick. And David; he’s somewhat of a wild card.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Alicia asked.

“David has disappeared, physically that is. He’s gone pretty deeply underground. He hasn’t been seen since Vick’s death; however, he has made several phone calls to both Celia and her father. He’s looking for money, and thinks he’ll be able to cash in on this in a big way. He uses disposable cell phones and has asked for money to be wired to an offshore account. So far, our investigators, and Miles’, have been unable to find him.”

“Why does David think that Miles or Celia would give him money, considering what we now know to be true?”

Miles sighed and said, "I'll take that one, son,"

He stood and walked across the room towards the massive stone fireplace. Next to the fireplace stood an enormous blue spruce, all decorated for Christmas with professionally wrapped presents already underneath. Miles stopped next to the tree and seemed to be admiring the twinkling of the lights for several minutes, before finally turning to Alicia.

"He has something on my son that he has threatened to go to the authorities with if I don't send him the money he wants by midnight on Friday."

Alicia raised an eyebrow, but didn't speak. Miles turned towards her and continued, "My son was in the mountains the day my wife died ten years ago. The authorities never had that information, so he was never questioned regarding her death. I don't want him questioned, and I have gone through great pains to make sure that never happens. My son is weak. He couldn't stand up to an interrogation. He would crack like an egg in five minutes or less.

"My daughter, she was cursed only by naivety. She was thinking that she could trust this man-whore she was seeing, and she told him some things that she never should have, things that should have remained in the family. That little gay boy wants to use that information now to destroy my family. If I thought he would go away, I would just pay him the damn

money. I don't believe for a second though that he would stop there. That boy would keep this shit up until he bleeds me and my family dry.”

“May I ask why it's so critical that the authorities not know Miles V was there the day your wife died?”

Brigham looked at her, and with his next words, I think Alicia had begun to understand the disdain he held in his eyes when he looked at his son.

“Because, little lady, my son killed her.”

CHAPTER TWO

ALICIA

I looked at Adam and saw that he wasn't shocked by any of this. He walked over and put his hand on my arm and said,

“It's alright. When Miles hired us, his son also paid to retain us as his legal counsel. What Miles just told you was disclosed to us after he hired us as counsel.” Adam looked at Miles, and then back at me and said,

“We did, of course, suggest the possibility of Miles V turning himself in. Neither he nor his father here were interested in that suggestion, however. Until now, it had not really become an issue. Our concern at this point is that David will in fact tell the authorities what he knows.”

I dropped down on the plush beige couch that I was standing next to. I watched the lights on the designer tree twinkle while I gathered my thoughts. Looking towards Adam, I said,

“So, my job is to keep Miles IV from getting arrested in relation to Vick’s murder, right?”

Adam said, “Yes, that is a large part of it.”

It suddenly dawned on me why he really wanted my criminal law expertise. “You expect me to defend Miles V also if what David is saying he did ever comes into play.” Adam gave me a nod and I went on, “Okay, then, what else do I need to know?” There was really no going back now.

The men spent the better part of the next hour filling in the blanks for me before I had enough and excused myself to turn in for the night. I had barely made it back to our room when Adam followed me in.

My mood had significantly darkened from earlier in the evening. He tried to touch me, but I told him I was too tired and rolled away from him. I wasn’t really angry with him, but I was pretty annoyed about what he’d gotten me into here. After a while, I felt him snuggle into me and press his hips into my behind. He draped his arm across my waist and pulled me into him tightly. I moved forward and he followed me until I was on the edge of the bed and couldn’t move any further.

I finally rolled over to chastise him, but before I could get any words out he covered my mouth with his. I didn't resist the kiss and as usual, my entire body responded to it. My stress and fatigue was suddenly replaced by desire, and as he pulled me up on top of him and lifted my nightgown up over my hips, I didn't protest. Instead, I made love to him and him to me until we were both so truly exhausted that neither of us could stay awake a moment longer.

We woke the next morning to Hannah's wake-up tap on the door. We were wrapped so tightly in arms and legs that it was almost hard to tell which limbs were whose.

After a quick breakfast with just the two of us that Hannah served on the terrace, we were picked up by one of Miles' drivers and driven to the airstrip. Hannah had packed up all of the paperwork that I had not had time to finish reading through the day before. She also issued a message from Miles, expressing his regrets at having to leave so early and not being able to see us off properly. There was no sign before we left of neither Celia nor Miles V, and for that I was grateful.

I felt a little guilty, but I actually allowed myself to hope that neither Miles would be arrested and I wouldn't be forced to defend either of them. I also wasn't sure that Celia was innocent in all of this, either. The look in her

eyes when she spoke about David's affairs with Vick had been pure hatred. Who's to say she wasn't involved, as well?

Nonetheless, I was their lawyer now and regardless of my personal feelings, I would give them the best possible defense...if any of them ended up needing one.

I read through more of Brigham's files on the flight home while Adam reclined in his seat and took a nap. I stopped what I was doing and looked over at him.

He was probably the most beautiful man that I had ever seen. I sometimes felt that it wasn't fair that his looks had so much power over me. His looks, of course, were not the only thing I found to love about him, but pushing him away might be much easier if I didn't have to look into his sexy dark eyes when I did it.

I had enjoyed our time together at Brigham's estate immensely. But if things didn't go as Adam hoped they would at his hearing on Monday, I had already resolved to end things once and for all. I couldn't keep this up. It wasn't fair to act as if I were having an illicit affair when in fact I wasn't.

I finally tore my eyes away from him and continued with my reading of the Brigham file. I looked through some of the photos, as well, during the rest of the flight. Whoever these investigators were that Miles IV had hired, had done a fantastic job surveilling Vick.

We had photos of his intimate trysts with Priscilla and David that looked as if they had been taken from inside the apartment. I felt even worse for Celia than as I looked at the photos of Vick and David. I had quickly set aside the ones of them involved in sexual activity, but the ones of them just spending time together, enjoying a glass of wine or just talking were up close and personal enough that you could almost read the love in David's eyes. Celia had definitely been the beard here and it had to hurt the poor girl to realize it.

As the plane descended back down into La Guardia, I sat the file aside. Adam opened his eyes and smiled that sweet, sleepy, oh so sexy smile that I loved so much.

"Hi, gorgeous," he said as he sat up and buckled his seatbelt for the landing.

"Hi," I said simply, but with a smile that let him know what I was thinking.

As I was buckling my seatbelt, he leaned forward and kissed me. "A few more days, and then we'll be together... forever. Think you can handle that?"

I couldn't help myself. Just the thought of having Adam to myself at last made me smile broadly. "I can't wait," I said, and although I was

thinking ahead about what I may have to do if things didn't go as planned, I didn't have the heart to bring it up.

We went our separate ways at the airport. Adam was going back to the office, so he took a cab. I took the town car back to my apartment. I was exhausted and all I wanted was to relax in my own home.

After a long hot shower, I listened to my voicemails. I had been so wrapped up in all of the Brigham drama that I hadn't even answered my phone in almost two days. The first message was from Kyla, wanting to know how mine and Adam's time together had gone.

The second was from my mother. It reminded me that my parents would be in town in just over a week, and I had better find some time to do some decorating and shopping for Christmas. My mother would be shocked if she knew her daughter had waited this late in the season to get a tree or put out so much as a twig of holly. Mrs. Winston had always begun the decorating on the first day of December, albeit she mostly acted as an orchestrator to her staff.

The third call was from Jack. He wanted to know if I would like to have dinner on Friday night. I would have to give that one some thought. Instead of calling him back, I called Kyla. A little innocent girl talk was what I really needed after the past two days of drama and bizarre confessions.

As it turned out, it was a lot of girl talk. I finally hung up almost two hours later. I told Kyla what a great time Adam and I had, what a bizarre family Miles Brigham IV had, and about Jack and his most recent phone call. Kyla had helped me to decide that there would be no harm in an innocent dinner out with an old friend. I had ultimately agreed, and after hanging up with Kyla, I called Jack and accepted.

I spent the rest of the day getting things done around the apartment and didn't sit down with the Brigham file again until evening. Over a cup of chamomile tea and some homemade cookies, I set about re-reading all of the documents.

Miles IV had told me that he was out of town the night Vick was murdered. He claimed he had been in Louisiana with a woman he had recently begun seeing. Inside the file were copies of his private pilot's flight plans for the day in question. I thought that it could be used as a very convincing alibi if need be.

There was no mention in the file of Miles V or Celia's whereabouts that evening. This concerned me a bit, knowing now what I did about the murder of Brigham's third wife. There were copies of Miles IV bank records, as well. I assumed that these were to prove he hadn't paid anyone to kill Vick while he was out of town formulating an alibi. I did think, however, that had I been the police or FBI, I would know that the great and

powerful Brigham would never be foolish enough to write out a traceable check for a murder for hire scheme.

My eyes were growing weary. I put the file aside at last, and headed to bed. I checked my phone before lying down, somewhat disappointed that Adam hadn't called to say goodnight. I started to think about him being across town in that plush, Manhattan apartment with Marjorie, but made myself stop. First of all, if I knew Adam, he was probably still at work, and second of all, even if he was home, he was not *with* Marjorie. I turned off the bedside light and closed my eyes, willing myself to dream of days to come when we could finally be together. Maybe all of Adam's Marjorie drama will be over before my parents arrived for the holidays, and then it would really be a Merry Christmas.

Adam finally called me the next morning as I was making my coffee.

"Good morning, baby," he said. "How was the rest of your day yesterday?"

"It was peaceful," I said. "Much more relaxing than the drama we walked into at the Brigham mansion."

Adam laughed. "Yes, they are an interesting bunch, aren't they? I got to spend the rest of my day working on his civil case. We go to trial soon. The press continues to tear him up on a daily basis, baby, and I don't think

things are looking too good for us as far as an untainted jury pool here in New York. I don't know if you've seen the *Post* yet?"

I said I hadn't and he went on, "That reporter I met with, Rose, did a piece today that wasn't just about the oil spill and the effects it had on the environment and the people, it was about Brigham himself. She had some pretty personal things in there, and even hinted that although she didn't personally believe that Brigham had killed anyone himself, it was a pretty safe bet that his hands weren't clean. She wasn't only speaking about Vick's murder; she was hinting around about his wife, as well."

"Wow, I wonder where she's getting her information." I opened the front door and picked up my own paper. I recognized Rose's byline on the front page, and as Adam talked, I skimmed through the article. I was surprised to find that some of the information in the article mirrored things that had been in personal documents Miles had allowed me to view.

"Adam," I said, thoughtfully, "do you think maybe David has been in touch with Rose and perhaps that is where she is getting some of her inside information?"

"I thought of that, too. Whoever she is getting her info from is definitely skewed towards Brigham being guilty of more than just wealth and power."

We mused over that for a bit, and then before I finally told Adam that I had to hang up and finish getting ready for work, I told him about Jack being in town and planning to have dinner with him on Friday night.

“Hmmm, an old friend, huh?” Adam said, I think he was trying to sound like he was joking but he also sounded a little worried. He confirmed that as he said, “No old feelings there, I hope?”

“He’s just an old and dear friend,” I told him. “It’s nice to catch up with someone from back home for a change.”

Adam didn’t say anything else about it. Instead, he changed the subject back to his hearing on Monday and how he couldn’t wait to finally be rid of Marjorie. We hung up on that note, with Adam promising to check in on me later at the office.

When I got to the office several hours later, it was unnaturally quiet. I ran into Carla in the hallway headed to our office.

“Why is it so eerily quiet around here today?” I asked.

“Well, Mr. Hanson and Mac are closed in the conference room in a meeting with Mr. Brigham and his associates. Nico and Kyla are in court this morning, I think, and I am not sure what’s going on with the rest of the staff. Maybe they’re all taking time off for the holidays,” she said.

“Hmm, maybe,” I said, thoughtfully as I took the message slips Carla handed me. I stepped into my own private office and began going through

them. They were mostly all simple matters that I could handle quickly this afternoon. There was one, however, that intrigued me at once. It was from a Rose Dugan at the *Post*, and it had a number. The message urged me to call ASAP. I was curious enough that I did just that. The number I called was a cell phone, and it was answered at once by a girl that didn't sound old enough to be a journalist at all. I was tempted to ask her if her mommy was home.

“Ms. Dugan?” I asked instead.

“Yes, this is her.”

“This is Alicia Winston; I'm returning a call from you.”

“Ms. Winston, yes, I am so glad you called. I was interested in finding out if perhaps you and I could meet sometime to talk about a serial piece I am doing on one of your client's for the *Post*?”

“Well, Ms. Dugan, you do know that a lawyer who is in the process of representing a client is bound by confidentiality? I'm sure there wouldn't be much information I could give you.”

“I am aware of that, Ms. Winston; actually, I was hoping to give you a little inside information.”

I was really intrigued. I agreed to meet with Rose over lunch at a coffee shop nearby the office. I couldn't imagine what type of “inside information” she could possibly have, but I was interested enough to go and find out.

I spent the rest of the morning returning phone calls and completing paperwork I had gotten behind on the past few days. I was about to wrap it up and leave for my meeting with Rose when Adam walked in. He came around behind my desk, and taking me by the hands he lifted me to my feet and planted a kiss on my lips.

“I missed you,” he said.

I smiled and kissed him back. “I missed you, too.”

“Have lunch with me?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” I told him. I was genuinely sorry. “I have a meeting. I was just leaving before you came in.”

“Well, I guess as your boss I can’t complain about you working through lunch.” Then taking me into his arms, he said, “As your boyfriend, however, I am very disappointed.”

I smiled again and said, “Me, too, love. Maybe we can have dinner?”

Adam’s mood seemed to change slightly. “Maybe, I’ll try to finish things up here in time.” I wasn’t sure what the mood shift was about, but feeling a little guilty myself for not admitting that my meeting was with Rose Dugan, I let it go.

I found Rose waiting for me outside of the coffee shop when I arrived. She looked almost as young in person as she had sounded on the phone. She wore very little make-up, and her dishwater blonde hair was swept back in a hasty bun. She wore Converse tennis shoes and a pair of jeans that were bleached and frayed in places and the overall effect was a high school girl.

“Ms. Winston?”

“Yes, hello,” I said as I approached the girl. I put out my hand and received a hasty shake in return.

“Let’s go inside,” Rose said.

After we took a seat and ordered our coffees, I said, “I must say, I am curious to know what information you might have with regards to one of my clients.”

“Well, first of all let’s cut to the chase, Ms. Winston,” Rose told me. “We both know the client that me and all of New York are most interested in right now is the wealthy and powerful Mr. Miles Brigham IV.”

I had of course known who the client was that interested Rose, but I was determined to let her do all of the talking during this particular meeting. I only nodded slightly, and she went on. “I’m sure you’ve read my piece on him by now?” I again nodded. “I am in touch with a source who knows quite a bit about your client and his family. This source of mine is helping

me build my piece, but is also concerned about you being drawn into the mess known as the Brigham family.”

I couldn't help myself; I had to ask, “Why would this ‘source’ of yours have any concerns about me?”

“Let's just say they do. and leave it at that,” Rose said. “This person has some pretty convincing evidence that Mr. Brigham and his devil's brood are guilty of many things other than arrogance and vulgar wealth. They asked me to tell you that you would possibly be placing yourself in danger by agreeing to represent them.”

I arched an eyebrow. Who did this little sprite think she was telling me who I should and should not “represent?” Surely, she didn't think I would be so simple minded as to dump my client on her say so alone. She must be up to something else, but I couldn't figure out just what yet. When I sat quiet long enough to make Rose uncomfortable, she said,

“Miles Brigham IV had everything to do with his third wife's murder and everything to do with the murder of Vick Landon, as well. I intend to prove it, and my source was kind enough to ask me to warn you before I brought the Brigham empire crumbling down. You can do what you wish with the information.”

With that, the arrogant young girl stood and put her bag on her shoulder. I looked up at her and said, “So that's it, you brought me here to

warn me that I may or may not be in danger and that you have some anonymous source who has some investment in my personal safety. You will not, however, tell me whom that source may be or what this so called evidence is that we have against my client. I think you have wasted my time, Ms. Dugan. I charge hundreds an hour for my time, I don't have any to spare for playing games.”

Rose smiled. The smile made her look like a kid who knew something that her mother didn't. “I warned you like I was asked, and here's one more warning, Ms. Winston. You may be charging Mr. Brigham hundreds of dollars an hour for your services, but be careful. He plays with people's lives just for fun.”

And with that, she walked out the door, leaving me to wonder what the hell that had even been about.

CHAPTER THREE

ADAM

I had another excruciatingly busy day and to make it even worse, I wasn't going to have time to meet Alicia for dinner. I grabbed a rose off of my assistant's desk and knocked on Alicia's door around five.

“Come in!”

I pushed open the door and found her still at work behind her desk. She looked up at me and smiled. God, she's gorgeous even with her hair falling out of the loose bun she had it tangled in and most of her make-up rubbed off from her hours of pouring over paperwork. I held out the rose to her and said, "I'm afraid I can't make dinner tonight, baby. But can I have a rain check?"

She took the rose and smiled, "I suppose. It's kind of been an exhausting day, anyways. I think a bubble bath and a cup of tea is just what the doctor ordered." I waited for her to pack up her things and put the files on her desk in Carla's basket so that she could take them back to records in the morning. Then, I walked her out to the parking garage.

It seemed like she was debating whether to tell me something important, but she stayed silent. I thought about asking her about it, but had so many things on my mind and a team still inside waiting for me, so I selfishly decided to wait and maybe she'd tell me at another time when I was not so overwhelmed.

When we reached her car, she pressed the unlock button on the fob in her hand and then I took her into my arms and gave her a long, deep kiss. When we came up for air, I held her back so I could look at her pretty, flushed face. It suddenly morphed into a look of disgust when she spotted

something over my shoulder. I turned and saw Marjorie. I felt like losing my lunch. She had that permanent nasty smirk on her face.

“What the hell? Marjorie, what are you doing here?”

“I was meeting my lawyer for dinner, and I just thought I’d come by and let you know. I didn’t want you coming home to eat with me like you did last night and finding that I wasn’t home.”

The bitch was trying to cause trouble as usual. I turned back toward Alicia quickly. “She’s lying. I did not have dinner with her last night. I was here, working.”

Marjorie feigned a serious look and said, “Oh dear, was I not supposed to say anything in front of the little woman?”

I spun around on her and before she had time to back up, I was in her face. “Shut the hell up, Marjorie! Shut your nasty, lying mouth! I wish you were dead, you know that? If I thought you were worth it, I would kill you myself.”

Marjorie didn’t even flinch. She wasn’t afraid of me because although I talked a good game, we both knew I’d never follow through with the violence she made swell in my veins. She laughed instead and said, “Such passion. Love and hate are such closely related emotions, aren’t they? Do you remember what amazing sex we used to have after a roaring fight?”

Every muscle in my body tightened and for a fraction of a second, I thought I just might be able to do it. Maybe I could kill the bitch. I felt Alicia's hand on my arm and heard her say,

“She's not worth it, Adam.”

Marjorie still didn't seem to realize she'd just almost pushed me too far. She smiled at both of us before turning and heading for the garage elevator. Just before the doors slid closed, she blew me a kiss. It turned my stomach and I felt Alicia's hand tense against my arm. “I didn't have dinner with her.”

Alicia put her hand up on my face and said, “I know.” I pressed my face into her palm and then slid it over to my lips and kissed it. “Enjoy your bath and quiet time.”

“I will. You don't stay too late. You can come and sleep at my place tonight. You need to get some rest.”

I nodded. I probably wouldn't just because I hated the idea of letting Marjorie have my place to herself. She made my blood boil. I kissed Alicia's cheek and she slid into the car.

As I closed her door I heard myself say, “I really do wish she was dead.” I don't think I meant to say that out loud. I know Alicia despises her, but me talking about her being dead couldn't be sitting well with her. At this point I was too exhausted and too fed up to care what anyone thought. I was

sick to death of my life being ruled by an evil, ungrateful bitch and I'd do just about anything at this point to just make her go away.

I stayed at the office until after ten. I was so tired by the time I got into my car that I was glad I wasn't driving. I actually saw spots in front of my eyes. I said a little prayer that Marjorie would be out when I got home, but it went unanswered, as usual. I walked into the penthouse to find her on the couch in her lounging outfit, painting her toenails and drinking a glass of wine. She had a fire roaring in the fireplace and the surround sound playing smooth jazz. She makes me sick. I tossed my keys on the table in the foyer and turned toward my bedroom.

“You don't want to have a glass of wine with me? You look like you could use a little unwinding.”

I looked at her with fire in my eyes and said, “I won't be unwound until you are out of my life once and for all.”

She smiled. “Don't count on that being any time soon.” Once again, rage hissed through my body. I took a step toward her, but caught myself and instead turned back toward the hallway and went to my room. I closed and locked the door behind me before ripping off my tie and jacket. I pulled

my phone out of my pocket then and called Alicia. She was the only thing that could calm me down where Marjorie was concerned.

“Hi, baby. What are you doing?” I was practically whispering. I was feeling paranoid like Marjorie was listening at the door. I didn’t want her being any part of my conversation with Alicia.

“Hi, I’m taking a bath. I wish you were here.” My mind pictured that and I groaned and then it dawned on me that she was headed home to take a bath hours ago.

“What took you so long to get your bubble bath?”

“Why are you whispering?”

I sighed. “Marjorie’s in the other room. I don’t want her overhearing us – she doesn’t need any more ammunition to torture us with.”

I could hear the change in Alicia’s voice at the mention of Marjorie’s name, but she was supportive anyways as she said, “I’m sorry, baby. Maybe Monday it will be all over, huh?”

“God, I hope so. It has to be. Let’s not talk about her any more though, please. Tell me about your evening and why you’re getting your bath so late.”

“I went shopping. I realized I haven’t even decorated for Christmas yet or started my gift shopping. While I was out, I bumped into Jack Grant, my

friend from the U.K.” I felt a tightening in my chest. I counted to ten in my head before saying,

“He seems to have a knack for bumping into you when you’re alone.”

“He was Christmas shopping, Adam. No evil intentions there, I assure you.”

I felt like a jealous ass. “I’m sorry, baby. Everything that’s been going on lately has given me the eerie feeling that there are evil intentions all around us.”

“I suppose I can’t blame you there,” she said. “We just can’t let all of this change the way we think about people. Everyone is not like Marjorie, or the Brigham’s, for that matter.”

“Thank God,” I said, wearily. “I think I should turn in for the night, so that we can deal with people such as Marjorie and the Brigham’s again bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“I love you, Adam,” she said. It’s funny how much better I feel hearing her say that in her cute little British accent. “Everything will be okay, soon.”

“I wish you knew how much I appreciate you.”

“I do know, love. I do believe it will be better soon. It has to get better, right?”

“I suppose it can’t get much worse.” It could, though. She could leave me. Now that this guy “Jack” was sneaking around, that could even be

another nail in my coffin. Shit! I was getting way too paranoid. I needed to get some sleep. “I love you, too,” I told her before hanging up the call. I undressed down to my boxers and collapsed on my bed. It was only seconds before I slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALICIA

I put the phone back down on the side of the tub after I talked to Adam and sighed as I dipped back down into the sudsy, warm bubbles. I felt horrible for him, but I also felt bad for me. He should be here or I should be there and Marjorie shouldn't be anywhere in our solar system.

I closed my eyes and heard the sound of his voice when he said Jack had been “bumping into me” a lot lately. I wasn't happy that he was jealous per se, but at least maybe it gave him just a taste of how I have to feel every time he was with Marjorie, only ten times worse, considering he was still married to her. Jack and I had really only bumped into each other again, just this time not literally.

On the way home, I'd decided I still had too much nervous energy after the run in with Marjorie to relax. Instead, I headed down to Times

Square where the shops were all still open late for holiday preparations and began my Christmas shopping.

I walked from shop to shop, picking out things that I thought my mom and dad would like. I found a gorgeous pashmina for Kyla, and bought several small holiday baskets for assorted people from the office. By the time I reached the last shop, my arms were so full of packages that I could hardly carry them all. The last shop was a jewelry store that offered custom designed items. I found exactly what I was looking for as a gift for Adam. I placed an order for a watch and inscribed it with the words,

“My boss, my mentor, my lover, my friend. Always, Alicia”

After I left there, I stopped in to a quaint little coffee shop on my way back to the garage where I left my car and ordered an extra-large latte. As I sat down at the nearest table to the counter and relieved myself of the weight of the packages, I slipped off my heels, too, and for the first time since seeing Marjorie in the parking garage at work, I began to relax.

“Wow, I hope you have a sleigh outside to carry all of that home in.” The voice startled me until I looked up and realized it was Jack. He was standing next to the table dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a black polo shirt, wearing that sexy lopsided grin that used to take my breath away.

I laughed and said, “That would be nice, actually, because maybe there would be a few elves out there to help me carry it all.”

“Well then, tonight is your lucky night,” he said as he sat down without an invitation,

“My other persona is an elf, and I was born to be a helper and a giver.”

I smiled, and asked him, “Do you have a crystal ball that helped you to find me this evening or were you just out shopping, as well?”

“Shopping,” he said, grinning again. “Unfortunately. That crystal ball thing would have been really cool.” We sat for a while, sipping our coffee and talking again, like hardly any time had passed between us. By the time we were ready to leave, I had laughed so much that my cheeks hurt and I had hardly allowed Marjorie to enter my thoughts once.

“Thank you, Jack. I needed this.”

“What? Coffee with an elf?” he asked playfully.

“Yes, an elf that can make me laugh and forget my problems for a bit was exactly what I needed.”

“Well then,” he said with a mock bow, “I am so glad I could be of service to you.”

Jack helped me gather up my bags and insisted on carrying most of them to my car. I gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek before getting into the car. “Thank you again. I had a wonderful evening,”

“You’re welcome, again,” he said. “So did I. Do you need me to follow you home and help you get this stuff up to your apartment?”

“No, thank you. The doorman will help me. He’s a very nice man.”

Jack looked disappointed, but said, “Okay, be safe and have a good night. I am looking forward to our dinner on Friday night.”

“Me, too,” I said as I got in the car.

Jack had stood there and watched me drive away. As I glanced in the rearview mirror before I pulled out of the lot I found it a little strange that he was still rooted to the spot I had left him in and watching me. I wasn’t going to admit that to Adam, though, especially since my imagination was probably simply going crazy because of all of the stress.

Adam and I didn’t see each other outside of the office again until Friday afternoon. He had sent a message to me through Mary inviting me out to lunch. He had been in meetings all morning outside of the office, so we decided to meet at a café we both liked in Manhattan. Adam met me out in front and gave me a long, sweet kiss.

“God, I missed you,” he told me when he had finally let me go.

“I missed you, too.” We went inside and were seated at a table near a big window. While we waited for our lunch, I asked him about his meetings and then finally addressed the elephant standing between us.

“How have things been with Marjorie?”

Adam made a face like he had tasted something sour. “The good news is, I’ve been so busy with work, I’ve hardly had to see her. The bad news is, I did have to see her a few times coming and going. I can hardly stomach looking at that woman. I can’t imagine what I ever saw in her to begin with.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to ask, but...”

Adam laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “It will forever be one of those ‘what was I thinking’ moments I guess.”

“I would probably understand it better if you had told me you were smoking crack when you proposed,” I said with a giggle.

“Me, too, actually,” Adam admitted. He turned serious then. I was glad when our lunch came and he was at least distracted for a time while we ate. Feeling bad about bringing Marjorie up, I changed the subject to Christmas and what I planned on making for dinner Christmas Eve.

“Do you think you’ll have any time next week to go and buy a tree with me?”

“I will do my absolute best,” he said. “I haven’t bought a Christmas tree in years.” I was about to ask about his and Marjorie’s Christmases, but caught myself. He was looking at his watch anyways, and I knew he was on the verge of leaving.

“Time flies, huh?”

He smiled. “Unfortunately, only when I’m with you. I do have to get back, babe. Miles’ trial begins right after the New Year. There are so damn many witnesses to interview. Each time I think we’re close to finishing up, someone else gets added to the list.”

“I have a lot to do at the office this afternoon, too,” I told him.

“And, your date with the old flame tonight, right?” Adam asked. He was smiling, but it was a tight one.

“Adam, you aren’t truly upset that I’m having dinner with Jack, are you?”

“No,” he said as he signed the credit card receipt the waitress had brought him. “I’m just jealous that he gets to spend the time out with you and not me, and honestly, baby, I’m still a little uneasy about how he seems to keep turning up everywhere you go.”

We walked outside arm in arm and stopped on the sidewalk. I rose up on my toes so I could look into his eyes and said, “He’s only ‘turned up’ twice, actually. And, if it helps to know this at all, I’d rather be with you, than anyone, anytime.”

Adam tipped my chin up further, and parting my lips with his tongue, he gave me a deep, passionate kiss that I never wanted to end. It did so suddenly, however, as we both felt and saw a flash of light at the same time. We turned simultaneously towards the source. Standing about three feet

away on the sidewalk was Rose Dugan, and some young kid with pimples on his face and a professional-looking camera draped around his neck.

Rose, with the over confidence that we had both seen upon meeting her on separate occasions, waved at us with three fingers and smiled like she was in on a private joke that neither of us knew about before getting back in a van that was adorned with the *Post* logo on the side and driving away.

We stood there stunned for a moment. We weren't celebrities, but somehow representing a billionaire oil baron had brought us both smack dab into the middle of the media circus. We both had a few choice words to say about the young and exceedingly arrogant Ms. Dugan on the way back to our cars. Once there, Adam kissed me again and said,

“I actually hope that picture gets put on the front page, that way the whole world will finally know how I feel about you.” That simple statement sent me back to work with a smile on my lips and hope in my heart.

I spent the afternoon working hard, leaving a little later than I had hoped. When I got home, I showered and dressed in a white angora sweater dress and boots. I was putting the final touches on my hair and make-up when Jack called. “I just wanted to make sure we were still on.”

“Yes, of course. I was just getting ready.”

“Great! I'll be there about seven.”

“Perfect. Do you need directions to pick me up?”

“No, I have you on GPS,” he said, and then added, “I just pulled it up now, as we were talking so that you wouldn’t have to bother trying to tell me how to get there.”

That was odd and gave me a little creepy feeling. Maybe I did need to talk to him about my relationship with Adam. I thought again about what Adam was implying about Jack running into me “too often.” I decided I’d talk to him at dinner and said, “Okay then, I’ll see you at seven.”

Jack rang the bell exactly at seven o’clock. I had known he was there already, thanks to the phone call that I had received from my doorman Luis, asking if I was expecting him before sending him up. I opened the door, and there stood Jack in a black suit with very small dark green pin stripes that perfectly matched his eyes. He was holding a bouquet of fragrant pink and white roses in one hand.

“You look beautiful,” he said as he held out the roses. “For you.”

“Thank you,” I said and stepped back to allow him in as I went to put the flowers in a vase. “You look very nice, yourself. Where are we going?”

“To a little Italian place I found downtown called Romaletti’s.”

I turned to look at his face. I wasn’t sure if Adam’s suspicions were playing on my mind or if in fact Jack knew way too much about my movements since he had been in town.

“Romaletti’s?” I repeated. “What made you decide on that restaurant?”

“I asked the concierge at my hotel for a recommendation,” he said. “He recommended it highly. Is there a problem?”

“No. No problem. Romaletti’s is a wonderful place. I’ll just get my coat.”

I grabbed my coat and bag and as I started to lock the apartment door, Jack took the key from my hand and locked both locks. He gave the knob a shimmy to make certain and then handed the key back to me. When I gave him a quizzical look he said,

“I just want to make sure you’re safe.” I didn’t say anything, but definitely we needed to talk. I allowed him to open the elevator and push the buttons and then open the car door for me when we got downstairs. He tried to lean across me to buckle my seatbelt also, but I thought that was going too far.

I took the belt out of his hand and said, “I got it, thanks.”

Jack only nodded, and then closing the door, he went around to the other side. Once in and buckled up himself he hit the automatic lock buttons on the doors. I looked at him strangely again.

“This is kind of a scary city, I want to be sure no one sees my gorgeous passenger and tries to jump in the car with us.”

Weird. I thought this was my opportunity to talk to him.

“Jack,” I started, “I’m not complaining that you’re so thoughtful of me. I’m afraid though that I’ve maybe led you to believe there could be more between us than is possible.” I looked at him, and couldn’t quite decipher the look on his face in the dark car. He didn’t say anything, however so I went on,

“I’m in a relationship. I didn’t tell you before because I hadn’t really seen it as being significant in our relationship since we have been only friends for a very long time now. I’ve just started to get the feeling the last few times that we’ve talked that you may be looking for this to go further?”

I said the last sentence like a question. He glanced over at me, and then putting his eyes back on the road, he said,

“Honestly, I had hopes. I’m a little embarrassed to say it now. I had just seen you so many times and you had been alone always, so I assumed that you weren’t seeing anyone seriously right now. I suppose it was wrong of me to assume. I should have asked.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I never meant to lead you on. My relationship has been really complicated lately and difficult to explain to anyone.”

He didn’t say anything, but as he pulled into the parking lot and the lights illuminated his profile I could see that his mood had drastically changed since we had left my place. He parked the car, then looked over again.

“You don’t have to be sorry. You haven’t done anything wrong. I suppose I also just imagined myself as not ‘just anyone’ in your eyes. At the very least, you are my best friend. I feel like I can tell you anything, even after all of these years. I was sincerely hoping you at least felt that much for me, as well.”

“Oh, Jack, I do think of you as my dear friend. It’s not that I felt I couldn’t talk to you about it. It’s like I said, it’s just all so complicated that it’s not a conversation I wanted to try to have over a fifteen-minute coffee ‘catch up’ session. Maybe we could talk about it tonight, if you’d like.”

He nodded and got out of the car. I waited and let him open mine for me and then I took the arm he offered and let him lead me into the restaurant. Marco was at the front desk and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he recognized me right away. I smiled at him and said, “Hello again, Marco. This is Jack. He’s a friend from my childhood that is visiting New York from London.”

I was afraid that he’d think I was cheating on Adam. Marco didn’t let on if he did, though. He gave Jack the same welcome that he had given me the first time he had met me. After our boisterous greeting, he upgraded the table Jack had reserved for us to one that he referred to as his “first class, VIP tables” and a complimentary bottle of the best house wine was sent over, as well.

“Wow,” Jack said. “This guy you’re in a relationship with must be really something to merit all of this attention just by knowing him.”

I smiled. “I think he’s really something, and apparently so does Marco.”

“So tell me about him,” Jack said as he poured us both a glass of wine.

“Well, he’s the owner of the firm I work for, for starters.”

“Adam Hanson?” Jack asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, you know of him?”

“I think anyone who is connected to the law in this town, or who picks up a newspaper, knows of Adam Hanson. He’s currently representing the most infamous billionaire in the country, is he not?”

“Yes, which is part of the reason you have been running into me alone so often. Adam has been up to his eyeballs with this case.”

“And the other part,” Jack asked, after the waiter had taken our orders.

“Well, that’s the complicated part. Adam’s in the midst of a messy divorce. His soon to be ex is being extremely difficult, and has even recently moved back in with him, claiming she’s staking out ‘her’ home so that Adam doesn’t take it from her just by virtue that she’s not in residence.”

“Hmm, actually that sounds like a smart move on her part.”

I gave him a look that I hoped conveyed I didn’t appreciate him defending Marjorie in any way before saying, “It was actually her lawyer

who gave her the idea. Adam thinks she's sleeping with him."

"Alicia, you do know that you deserve better than part of a man's affections and all of this drama, don't you?"

"It's not like that, Jack. Adam is entirely devoted to me. This will all be over soon. I find him to be worth waiting for." Jack didn't respond to that, so trying a shot at changing the subject I said,

"Is there anyone special in your life these days? My mother mentioned not long ago that she heard you had gotten engaged."

A dark cloud passed before Jack's eyes. "That was a mistake. Alicia, promise me something. If the drama doesn't stop soon with this man, you'll reevaluate what you want and need out of a relationship."

"Jack," I said, trying to choose my words wisely, "I am quite capable of looking out for myself. This will be over soon, but even if it's not, I do have the right to choose what I do and do not wish to deal with. I feel that I'm level-headed enough to make that decision on my own."

Jack nodded. He looked about to say something else when our dinner arrived and interrupted him. By the time we started eating, his mood seemed to have changed again. He was back to being the old witty Jack, telling jokes and funny stories to make me laugh. I wrote off his moodiness to the residual feelings he still harbored and let it go at that for the time being.

The rest of the evening was spent on light conversation and I really enjoyed myself. By the time Jack dropped me at my apartment and gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek goodnight, the uncomfortable feelings about his earlier behavior had all but gone away.

CHAPTER FIVE

ADAM

I made time Saturday afternoon to go pick out a Christmas tree with Alicia. I didn't really have the time, but I had barely seen her all week and I was having withdrawals. I also knew she'd been out with her "friend" the night before and shamelessly, jealousy was eating away at me.

I picked her up in the morning and we walked to a nearby coffee shop. We started our day out with hot chocolate and warm croissants before walking to a nearby tree lot. At the sight of the trees, Alicia's pretty eyes lit up and I watched her in awe as she went from one tree to the next examining them like she was making a lifetime purchase.

"This one is nice and fat, but he has a hole on the other side."

"Put that to the wall," I told her.

"No, I'd rather find one full all the way around."

I tried not to laugh at her as she went to the next one and the next. I saw one that I liked and said, “What about this one?”

She came over and walked a circle around it. “He’s kind of skinny.”

“Maybe we could feed him and fatten him up,” I said with a grin.

She stuck her tongue out at me. “I just want it to be perfect. It will be our first year celebrating together and Mum and Dad will be here, too.”

“I know, baby, I’m just teasing. Pick away.”

An hour later she’d finally picked out the tallest, fattest one on the lot. Thankfully, they delivered. After paying for it, we walked hand in hand back over to Central Park and had lunch. There were a lot of holiday kiosks set up around the park, and Alicia bought some Christmas decorations. We had another cup of hot chocolate and sat on a bench to watch the ice skaters while we sipped it. She slipped her hand into my pocket and laid her head on my shoulder. I watched all of the children playing on the ice, imagining what it might be like to have a child someday with her. I’d never wanted kids before, but I think Alicia would make a wonderful mother and, maybe because I was getting older, I thought I might enjoy being a father myself.

After another hour or so, we walked back to her place. Luis met us at the door and told her that the tree had been delivered. He’d had them set it in the hallway just outside of her apartment. When we got upstairs, I dragged it inside. We set it up...and watched it fall over three times before

it was stable enough to decorate. She brought out a pot of coffee and Christmas cookies to enjoy while we dressed up the tree. It was something I hadn't done since I was a kid, and I had a great time with her doing it.

When she was finally satisfied with it, we lay back on the couch and she snuggled into the crook of my arm while we admired our work. It only took fifteen minutes before we were kissing and my hands were roaming around underneath her clothes.

“Do you want to take this to the bedroom?” she asked with a grin.

“Nope.”

Looking confused she said, “No? You want to do it here on the couch?” I was obviously aroused so there was no denying I wanted to “do it,” as she had so cutely put it.

“Nope.”

“You don't want me?”

I laughed. “I want you all the time, too much. I walk around with a semi-hard cock all day just thinking about you. I want you, baby. You owe me a shower, though, remember? Or at the very least, a bubble bath.”

She smiled. “A bubble bath would get my vote.”

“Okay, why don't you go fix it while I put these cups away and pour us a glass of wine.”

She giggled like a little girl as she headed down the hall to the bathroom. I heard the water running as I carried the wine glasses down the hallway toward the bedroom. When I made it into the bathroom, the first thing I noticed was that she'd stripped out of her clothes. I hardly noticed anything else but that. She took the wine glasses out of my hands and instructed, "Strip."

Laughing, I did as I was told. She watched as I peeled off each garment and once I was fully naked, she sat our wine on the wide edge of the now bubble-filled tub and climbed in.

She turned off the water and I watched her sexy body disappear down into the water. I stepped in behind her and she leaned back into me. She had pulled her hair up into a messy bun and her gorgeous neck and shoulders were bare. I kissed across one shoulder and then up her long graceful neck. Then I started massaging them. She moaned and leaned forward slightly. I ran my hands down her spine, massaging with my fingers and when I reached the bottom of it, I slid them up her sides and brushed my fingers lightly against the sides of her breasts.

She shuddered and tipped her head back. I put my mouth to her ear and slipped a hand around her waist. I sucked the delicate lobe in between my lips and used my tongue to tantalize her as I slid her up into my lap.

I used the hand on her waist to caress her stomach and then slid it up to her breasts. She let out a little cry as I pinched one nipple firmly between my thumb and forefinger. I moved my hand over and did the same to the other one and then I slid my hand down between her legs. She squirmed against my hard cock, which she was sitting directly on top of, as I put my fingers against her clit and began to rub it in small circles. She had her head all the way back and pressed into my shoulder and her breaths were coming in short gasps. I rubbed hard and fast and loved the way her sliding against my cock felt as I did.

It didn't take long to bring her to her first orgasm. She shivered and shook in my arms as she came and then relaxed back into me once she was finished. I could feel her legs shaking against mine. When she caught her breath, she pushed up and slid around to face me. She was straddling my waist with a knee on either side of me. I pulled her up on top of my cock and let the tip slide into her. I reached behind her and unplugged the tub... we were about to make one hell of a mess. She wrapped her legs around my waist and sat down, taking the rest of me inside of her as she did.

I started thrusting my hips up, and she clutched onto my shoulders and rode me as the water sloshed from side to side and over the edges of the tub. I didn't care if we flooded the whole place. I'd buy her a new one.

I slid my hands down and gripped the firm cheeks of her ass and squeezed them. I used them as leverage to slide her up and down on my hard pole, striking deep and hard each time. Alicia was returning each one of my thrusts with one of her own. Her soapy breasts and hard nipples were pressed into me, and the sight of her and the smells of the perfumed bath and the sounds she was making that echoed off the walls filled my senses. When I couldn't hold back any longer, I plunged into her all the way and held myself there as I came. It was another earth-shattering orgasm and once again, I reminded myself that I needed to get rid of Marjorie so that I could have this every day...and soon.

I held her in the tub until all of the water drained and then we got out and into the shower. Things got wild again and I ended up fucking her up against the cold tile wall before we could both concentrate on an actual shower. Once we were clean and dried off, I reluctantly told her I had to go. Brigham's jet was picking me up at JFK in an hour.

“You're going back out to his estate?”

“Yeah. I'd rather stay with you...”

She smiled. “Most people would rather stick needles in their eyes than spend an evening with those crazy people, I think.”

I laughed. “That, too. But I really would rather be with you than with anyone at any time.”

“I know,” she said as she leaned into me. “Me, too.”

“Want to go with me?”

She grimaced. “Do you need me to go...for business?”

“No, baby, this part is about the civil case.”

“Then, not a chance,” she told me with a grin. I didn’t blame her, at all. I kissed her again before dressing and forcing myself to leave. On my way out, I looked at the tree we’d decorated together once again. My heart swelled in my chest.

It was the little things like that I wanted to do with her forever. I’d never had fun with Marjorie – or any woman really for that matter. My marriage to Marjorie had always been more like an unpleasant business arrangement and any women I was with before her had been strictly for sex. With Alicia, I wanted it all, and no matter what I had to do, I was going to have it. I was beginning to think fighting Marjorie over “things” was completely moronic when it took time away that I could be spending with the most beautiful, amazing girl on earth. I’d have to call my attorney before we went to court on Monday. Maybe I would be willing to change my terms to please her...and get rid of her.

CHAPTER SIX

ALICIA

I actually spent a lazy Sunday just reading and catching up on housework and laundry. I didn't hear from Adam, but I knew he was stuck at the Brigham mansion all weekend, so I didn't worry about it. I thought it was a lot better than the alternative actually: being stuck at the penthouse with Marjorie. On Monday morning, I called him to wish him luck with his and Marjorie's court date.

"Thanks, baby, but I don't think I'll need much luck today. I think she's finally going to agree to our terms and accept them." I wasn't sure what had changed, but he sounded excited and hopeful for the first time in quite a while, and I was happy about that.

"Well, luck or no luck I hope all goes well. I miss you," I told him.

"I miss you, too. Dinner tonight?"

My mood elevated at the mere thought. "Absolutely." We made plans to talk later and after saying good-bye, I got ready for work and got my own day started. I was humming when I stepped off the elevator until I saw Carla's face. Suddenly, I knew for sure it was Monday.

"What's up?" I asked.

She gestured her head to the waiting room to the left. I glanced over, and in the waiting area sat DA Dawson. He was dressed to kill in what I could only imagine was a suit he had purchased in the children's

department, and his bald little head was so shiny that I almost couldn't look directly at it.

He stood when he saw me notice him. "Ms. Winston," he said, holding out his pudgy little hand with the stubby fingers on it for me to shake. I had to force myself to take it.

"Mr. Dawson, to what do I owe the pleasure of an early morning visit from the District Attorney?"

Dawson looked at Carla as if he was concerned she may be a spy and then said, "Perhaps we could discuss it in your office."

"Sure, this way." As I passed Carla's desk, I rolled my eyes and made a face. I could tell she was trying not to laugh. Once inside the office, I offered Dawson a seat and a bottle of water. After he was settled, I asked again, "How can I help you, Mr. Dawson?"

"Well, Ms. Winston, I believe I am actually here to help you."

"And how is that?"

"Well, I have a warrant for the arrest of one of your current clients, and I wanted to offer you the chance to surrender him, as opposed to me sending the state police to fetch him at his home or his office."

Knowing who it was without asking, I asked anyways, "Who is this client, and what is he suspected of?"

Dawson smiled his little gnome-like smile. “The great man, Miles Brigham IV is the client, and I think you and I both know that the crime he is suspected of, as you so delicately put it, is murder.”

I could feel a headache beginning to start just slightly behind my eyes and in my temples. I had a feeling that it would only get worse as the day went on and by sundown I might be sporting a full-blown migraine.

“Murder?” I said to Dawson in a skeptical tone. “May I ask what evidence this is based on?”

“You may, indeed,” he answered smugly. “First of all, your client had motive. He had recently discovered two things about Vick Landon, the first being that he was sleeping with his daughter’s boyfriend. I’m sure that set his teeth on edge.”

He smiled that nasty little smile of his and then went on, “Secondly, Mr. Brigham had also recently discovered that much of the monies he believed had been sunk into the Presidential campaign had actually been diverted into Vick’s own account and used to keep his stripper girlfriend set up at the Plaza and in designer shoes.”

“Okay, so he had reason to dislike the man and possibly have him arrested for embezzlement or misappropriation of funds,” I agreed. “But kill him? I do think that if the affair had pushed him too far, perhaps David would have been the target of a murder, rather than Vick?”

“Yes, I thought about that. But, have you seen David since any of this took place? The man is hiding out, running for his life. I don’t believe Brigham intended to leave him as a loose string. The night that Vick died, he and David had made plans to rendezvous. I believe Brigham got impatient and scared David off before he could kill them both.”

“Fancy little theories you have there, Mr. Dawson,” I said with a smile. “But there is the small matter of proof. You haven’t forgotten that, have you?”

Dawson snorted out a laugh before saying, “I have a ninety percent conviction rate, my dear. No, I have not overlooked the proof. Vick lived in a very swank apartment building in SoHo. There are security cameras everywhere. Mr. Brigham, be he a formidable business man, is not skilled at playing the dress-up game.”

I continued to sit silently. I had the feeling that Dawson was about to tell me they have Miles on tape, which was definitely a game changer. I waited for him to continue, however.

“He wore a plaid flannel shirt and a pair of jeans. The ball cap that he wore was pulled low, almost over his eyes. His tennis shoes were well-worn. He made it through most of the place without getting his face on camera. I’ll guess he’s become pretty good at that over the years.

Unfortunately for Mr. Brigham, there was one camera in the back stairwell

that was not obvious. In fact, a pigeon had actually built a nest on the brackets that held it to the wall. We almost didn't find it ourselves."

"So, you have a man who resembles my client leaving the building on the night of the murder. No smoking gun? No witness?"

This time, Dawson laughed out loud. "Oh, I have a witness. Did I forget to mention that David contacted us? He was scared to death of facing Brigham in court, but we assured him that we would provide for his safety. So, my dear, I have to ask again... Would you like to surrender your client or should we fetch him?"

My headache began to spread. Damn Brigham if he lied to me. Taking a deep breath and calling again on my professional façade, I said, "Give me a few hours to get a hold of him. I'll call you by noon and let you know when and where."

Dawson rose from his seat with a satisfied smile and held out his pudgy hand once more. "I will look forward to your call, Ms. Winston. Have a pleasant morning."

I shook his hand, and as he let himself out, I slumped down behind my desk. If they really did have video of Brigham in the building and if David really is willing to testify against him, our case was all but lost already. Brigham was a villain in the media already because of the oil spill – finding an untainted jury pool anywhere in this country would be a challenge, if not

impossible. There was also the gay angle. If the gay activists attached themselves to this case as the EPA had attached themselves to the civil one, we were in for even more bad P.R.

Carla cracked open the door, and poking her head inside, asked, “Anything I can do for you?” I smiled at her, grateful I had good people in my corner.

“Yes. Please get Miles Brigham IV on the phone, ASAP. Call Mr. Hanson’s team if you need to, one of them will have to know where he’s at. Oh, and Carla, get the investigator in here, too. I need him to find someone, today.”

Carla headed out to make her phone calls, and I started making my own. First, I called Miles’s cell phone. It went straight to voicemail, and I left a message telling him he needed to call me and it was urgent. I tried his home, and left another message, this time with Hannah to have him call me as soon as he got in. Before I began dialing his office, Brett, one of Adam’s best investigators knocked on my door.

“Brett it’s so nice to see you.” I shook his hand and said, “I need to you to find someone, fast.” I told Brett a little about the case, and then gave him a description and a picture from the Brigham file of David. “I need to speak to him right away.”

“I’ll get right on it,” he said, “I’ll call you as soon as I get anything.”

I thanked him, and after he left, I called Miles's main office and again left another message. No one seemed to know where he was. I glanced at the clock as I hung up the phone. It was ten a.m. Adam's hearing had started at eight-thirty. I was surprised I hadn't heard from him by now, telling me how it went. I decided to try his phone, hoping that the hearing had gone well, and perhaps he may know where I could locate Miles. Adam answered on the first ring, but he didn't sound happy.

"Hi, babe," I said. "How did it go?"

"It was ridiculous!" Adam barked into the phone. "The judge gave that worthless bitch everything she wanted – everything, Alicia. She has my home, my assets, and is even a financial partner of the firm. Isn't that just great?"

I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. Adam had been so sure that things would end on a more positive note for him. "How did this happen?"

I could hear Adam sigh. "She had pictures of us. She told the judge that we had been seeing each other even before she and I split up. She actually cried and gave him some big story about how much she had loved me. How much she had given up so that I could go to law school and establish my business. The judge bought it all."

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry." I was in shock myself. I didn't know what else to say.

“Nothing to be done now,” he said, abruptly

I allowed the silence to fall between us for a moment, and then said, “I’m sorry to ask this right now, but do you know where I can find Miles? Dawson has issued a warrant for his arrest.”

“Damn!” Adam said too loudly into the phone. “No, I haven’t spoken with him today. Find him though, quickly! If the police or the press finds him first, there is no telling what the old SOB might say to get himself into even more trouble.”

“I know. Adam, I’m looking. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said as he disconnected the call.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADAM

Alicia called me around six. “I found Miles. I see why you were so worried about what he would say. He’s an idiot for such a smart man.”

“I know,” I said. “You can fill me in on the details at dinner if we’re still on?”

I could almost hear the smile in her voice as she said, “There is nothing I’d rather do tonight. You sound better than earlier, I’m glad.”

“Yeah, I feel better. I’ve spent the day with Mac going over just exactly what Marjorie can and cannot do as far as my firm is concerned. I stand to lose a chunk of money, but she cannot take my business over.”

“That is good news!” Alicia said happily. “Does this mean she can’t fire me, either?” She sounded like she was kidding, but it had crossed my mind, too.

“Never!” I told her, “My employees, and my lover for that matter, are out of her control.”

“I’m really glad things are looking better, babe. Where are we having dinner?”

“At Romaletti’s, if that’s okay?”

“Of course.”

“Would you mind meeting me there at seven-thirty? I just have a few more things to take care of first.”

“Not at all, I’ll see you then.

Alicia was already seated at the table Marco saves for us when I walked in at seven fifty-five. She was looking out the window watching the ducks and I got to study her profile as I approached the table. She’s so beautiful it takes my breath away. When she looked up and saw me, I could see the light in her eyes, and I loved it. I bent down and kissed her cheek. “Hi, baby, I’m sorry I’m late.” I had stopped and bought her a bouquet of orchids

from a street vendor. I handed them to her and she buried her nose in them and then smiled up at me. “It’s okay, I was just getting worried.”

“I’m sorry you worried, but all is well.” She didn’t ask any questions about why I was late and I was glad. I was just happy being here with her and I didn’t want anything else getting in the way of that. Marco prepared an exquisite meal for us, and while we ate, I said, “Okay, tell me what happened with Miles today.”

She rolled her eyes. “So, I was in my office making phone call after phone call and he was suddenly on the line saying, ‘Hi there, young lady, I hear you’re looking for me.’

““Yes, Mr. Brigham, I have been. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but the District Attorney has issued a warrant for your arrest.’ He cussed so much and so loudly I had to hold the phone back from my ear. Finally, he calmed down and said,

““So what now?’

““I need you to meet me at the station, to turn yourself in.’

““And why the hell would I want to hand myself over to the piranhas?’ was his reply.”

I shook my head. I could just hear him. “So what did you tell him?”

“The truth,” she said. “I told him, ‘Because, sir, if you don’t, they’ll come looking for you. It won’t be pleasant when they find you, and they’ll

make sure the media is on full alert, as well.’ He didn’t agree to turn himself in right then; he wanted to see me at the office first, so I agreed.’”

She looked like she was remembering something else. She had a pained expression on her face and I asked, “Did he not show up?”

“He showed up. It was just that in between that time was when Marjorie came in shooting off her mouth and I smacked her,” she admitted. I couldn’t help it – I laughed loud enough for other people to glance at our table. Marjorie had it coming, and I was sorry I missed it.

I laughed again and she said, “I’m so sorry. She made me so angry I just wasn’t thinking.”

“I don’t know why you’re still apologizing.”

“She marched into my office and told me she was taking over the business and I were going to be fired.”

“Sounds like she asked for it.”

“I’ve never hit anyone in my life.”

“Some people don’t understand anything else,” I told her. “Besides, I’m sure everyone knows she goaded you into it. Tell me more about what happened with Miles.”

“I spent a half an hour telling him what evidence the DA claimed to have. He denied killing Vick again, but then added that, ‘the stupid little bastard had it coming.’”

“He has no filters,” I said. She nodded and grimaced.

“So what happened at the police station?” I asked

“He was read his rights and booked. I watched the video. It’s grainy and it could be Miles, but I don’t see it as proof. Anyways, I pushed for the bail hearing, and he was let go on two million dollars bond and he had to surrender his passport.”

“Did he cuss a lot?”

She laughed. “Under his breath, thankfully. Brett called while I was there, though, and told me he found David.”

“Great! Where is he?”

“He is surrounded with police and federal agents. They are there for his protection, but Brett says the manpower is overkill.”

“Yeah, the Feds have some kind of stake in him they’re not telling us about.”

“Right? So anyways, Brett is going to look into that. There is one more thing...”

“What’s that?”

“Probably nothing, but I ‘ran into’ Jack again at Starbucks after I left the courthouse. Once again, he said it was a coincidence, but I’m beginning to wonder...”

I didn't like that at all, but I also didn't want it to damper what I had planned. "We'll talk about that later, baby. In the meantime, promise me you won't be alone with him until we figure out his angle."

"I don't think..." The look on my face must have convinced her not to argue because she said, "Okay, I promise."

Marco sent over a rich piece of chocolate cake and when we finished our dessert, we walked around the duck pond again and watched the swans glide across the surface. Toward the end of the deck was an old-fashioned light post. I led her over to it and turned her so her back was against it. She grinned up at me, thinking I was going to kiss her, but I had bigger plans. I knelt down on one knee and watched her eyes widen.

"What are you doing?" I pulled the velvet box I was carrying in my pocket out and flipped it open to reveal the ring inside. "Adam..."

I laughed. "Shush! I was going to wait for Christmas to do this, but with all that's been happening; I thought we needed something to look forward to right now. Alicia Winston, will you marry me?"

She looked stunned. We had spent so much time talking about mine and Marjorie's marriage that we had never mentioned our own happening someday. I had thought about it though, a lot. I knew I wanted her to be my wife more than anything in the world and I was sure that somehow everything else would work out if only we were together.

Alicia's face told me she felt the same way once the shock wore off.

"Yes, oh, Adam, yes, I'll marry you," she said with tears in her eyes.

I slipped the beautiful diamond on her finger and then stood to kiss her. Marco's staff came out on cue and suddenly violins were playing somewhere across the pond. We kissed in the moonlight, feeling the warm glow that love brings with it. It was a beautiful night that I knew I'd look back on forever when I needed to smile.

When it was time to go, I left my car with the valet at Marco's and told him I would send for it tomorrow. I drove Alicia's car to her apartment, and we barely made it across the threshold before we began tearing at each other's clothing like teenagers. The stress of the day and the excitement of the evening had manifested itself in an animal-like lust that neither of us could – or wanted – to control. When we were fully inside and the door was locked behind us, I lowered her down to the carpet in the living room and began my exploration of her body with my hands, lips, and tongue.

Alicia moaned and writhed on the carpet, begging for more. I gave it to her, licking and sucking her to an almost screaming orgasm before I finally slid my throbbing erection inside of her. It didn't take long for both of us to explode simultaneously, and I held her afterwards and rocked up inside of her for a long time before looking at her face and saying, "Damn! If that's what stress does for us, I think we need more of it."

“I agree,” she said as she snuggled into me.

We lay there like that for a long time enjoying the silence like only lovers can until it was rudely shattered by the ringing of my phone. I refused to let go of her, so I half-dragged her along with one hand while I reached my jacket and pulled the phone out of the pocket. I looked at the face and said,

“Hmm, it’s Mac. I wonder why he’s calling so late. Hey Mac, what’s up?”

“Marjorie’s dead.”

I pulled my arm out from underneath Alicia and sat up. “What?”

“She’s dead, Adam. The police are here...”

“Jesus, I’ll be right there.” I ended the call and Alicia said,

“Your face is as pale as a ghost. What happened?”

“Marjorie is dead.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALICIA

Adam tried to go without me, but I wouldn’t let him. When we got there, we were turned away by the officer guarding the door. Adam told him who he was, though, and insisted on talking to the detective in charge of the

case. They made us wait for half an hour before two detectives appeared at last. The older one introduced them, but directed everything toward Adam. “This is Detective Cane and I’m Samuels,” he said. “How did you know what happened?”

“My partner called me. He said he received a call from Marjorie’s lawyer. I don’t know why he called Mac and not me. Anyways, we came right over. But, I still don’t know what happened to her. Was it an accident?”

The detective acted as if he had just noticed me then and said, “And you are?”

“My name is Alicia Winston. I am Mr. Hanson’s associate.”

The detectives exchanged a glance that said they weren’t buying the “associate” thing at eleven-thirty pm, but they didn’t push it. I had my hand on Adam’s arm. His muscles felt tense and I could tell that he was growing impatient.

“What happened to her?” he asked again.

Instead of answering his question, the detective said, “Mr. Hanson, maybe you and your ‘associate’ can come inside with us and answer a few questions.”

“Fine,” Adam agreed. He was definitely annoyed. He’s used to being the one in control. This was going to be hard on him. We followed the

detectives around the caution tape and into the lobby of the building.

Once inside, the detective that had been doing the talking thus far said, “Mr. Hanson, would you follow me?”

“Ms. Winston, I’ll need you to come with me,” instructed the other detective. I looked at Adam and he gave me a slight nod before following the detective to a seat across the room. It was going to be a long night.

I followed Detective Cane across to a couch in the lobby and he gestured for me to take a seat. I looked across the room at Adam. He looked lost and even a little nervous, which was totally out of character. My heart was aching for him. I looked towards the detective and said,

“Can we please just get this over with? It’s been a long day.”

He sat down next to me. “Ms. Winston, can you tell me how well you knew Mrs. Hanson?”

I sighed; my headache had finally grown into a full-blown migraine. It was hard to think around the way it was pounding.

“I did not know her well. I had met her on several occasions, and we weren’t on the best of terms.”

“And why was that?”

“Because I have been seeing Adam for the past six months or so. He and Marjorie were separated for quite some time before he and I began seeing each other, but she was a bitter woman, and she was angry with me

for whatever reason.” The detective raised an eyebrow, and made a note on the little pad he carried.

“How did Mr. Hanson get along with his wife?”

“Ex,” I corrected him. “It was an ugly divorce. Adam obviously wasn’t pleased with what was going on between them.”

“May I ask where you were earlier this evening?” the detective said as he absently scratched his head with his pen. Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Am I a suspect?” I asked.

“No, ma’am, we’re just trying to get a time line on everyone involved here.”

“I was out this evening, at dinner in a crowded restaurant. Adam was with me, so neither of us were ‘involved’ in Marjorie’s death. That will be the last question I will answer tonight and now that you have your ‘timeline,’ I’d like to get back to Adam.” The detective looked as if he were about to say something else, but changed his mind.

“Alright, ma’am, I’d like to get your information in case more questions arise later?”

I gave him my cell, home, and office numbers, and then without waiting for him to give his consent, I stood and walked over to where Adam

was still talking to the other detective. As I approached, I heard Adam repeating almost verbatim, what I had told the other man.

“Ms. Winston and I were at dinner, at Romaletti’s. Are you implying that you think either of us had anything to do with this?”

“No, sir, not at all,” the detective told him. “I’m just trying to establish a timeline.”

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” I interrupted. “Perhaps you can speak to Mr. Hanson tomorrow, after he’s had some time to absorb all of this and get some rest.”

“Sure,” the detective said, although somewhat reluctantly. “Let me just ask where I might reach you.” Adam gave him his cell and office numbers as I had the other detective, and then he said,

“So, now will you answer my questions? What happened to her?”

Before the detective had time to speak, a gurney was brought out of the elevator. It carried a black body bag, and as the attendants rolled by with Marjorie’s body, Adam looked as if he were about to wretch. I shuddered. I had despised the woman, but the thought of her lifeless body being inside of that bag replaced all of my hard feelings with sadness.

After the medics had rolled the gurney outside, Adam repeated his question, “What happened to her?” This time through his clenched teeth.

“The M.E. hasn’t made a determination yet, but at this point we do know that it looks like she was strangled. Whether or not that was the cause of her death remains to be seen. We’ll have more information after the autopsy is completed.”

“And did you talk to her attorney...her boyfriend, whatever you want to call him, Hal Rogers?”

“Yes, sir. We spoke to him as soon as we arrived. He was the one who discovered the body.”

“I’m a little curious about how he got into my apartment,” Adam said.

“He told us he had a key. He said the lady was expecting him.”

Adam stood up and said, “Well, far be it from me to tell the police how to do your job, but he’d be someone I’d be looking into, if I were you.”

“Thanks for the advice,” the detective said somewhat sarcastically. “I’ll be in touch.”

As he started walking away Adam said, “Wait, can I get my things from the apartment?”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible tonight sir,” the man told him. “The crime scene techs will be a while.”

“Come on,” Adam said, taking me by the hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

As we walked out through the lobby doors, we saw that in the short time we had been here, the press had arrived. Standing next to a white van,

photographer at her elbow, was Rose Dugan.

We tried to hurry past as she yelled out, “Mr. Hanson, didn’t you lose most of your assets just this morning to your ex-wife?” and when Adam continued to walk on, pulling me along beside him she yelled,

“Ms. Winston, would you like to make any comment about the scuffle you were in with Mrs. Hanson this afternoon?”

I stopped and turned to look at her. I was caught off guard by her question. Who had told her about that? Just as I looked Rose’s way, the flash from the photographer’s camera went off in my face, blinding me to all else going on around us.

“Baby, come on,” Adam prompted as he tugged gently on my hand. “We’ll figure this out when we get home, let’s just get out of here.”

Adam guided me through the sea of reporters, and as the bulbs continued to flash and the voices all seemed to meld into one terribly loud roar in my pounding temples, I couldn’t help but think how surreal this all was. I had always thought, growing up, how exciting it would be to become an attorney someday. I had never thought that someday I would wish the excitement would just stop, and that my life could be just average and boring like everyone else’s.

On the car ride home, I let my thoughts drift back to a simpler time when I was a little girl and would spend hours in my playhouse in the backyard. My playhouse was not like other little girl's. My father who often over-indulged me had seen to that. Mine was an actual house, only on a much smaller scale than grown-up people lived in. It had a kitchen with a real working sink, a living room, bathroom, and a bedroom. I often pouted to my father that the bedroom may as well have been left out, since Mother would never allow me to spend the night in the backyard. It wasn't an "appropriate" thing for young ladies to do, according to the Lady Winston.

I always had an active imagination as a little girl. I could spend hours playing alone with my dolls and stuffed animals. I was the attorney and they were the bad guys or the victims or the judge. I knew even then what I wanted to do when I grew up. I wanted to defend all of the innocent people who were wrongly accused or had been forced to do things they wouldn't have otherwise because they had been in a bad situation.

I hadn't lost all of that idealism. I still believed that people were inherently good. I had promised myself long ago that if I ever lost that ideology, I would change careers. I truly believed that people deserved a chance to either prove their innocence or explain what kind of terrible situation they were in that had caused them to do whatever they were being accused of. Tonight, I found myself wondering what kind of situation the

person who had killed Marjorie tonight had found him or herself in that would cause them to take a life.

Adam and I hadn't spoken a word to each other on the way back to the apartment. I had been lost in my memories, and I presumed he had been, as well. I looked over at him as he parked the car. His face was drawn and sad, and all I wanted to do right then was hold him and make it all go away for a little while. When we had gotten up to the apartment, I brewed him some tea while Adam went in to build us a fire. I could hear him on his cell phone as he arranged the logs and paper. He was talking to Mac, trying to find out why Hal had called him and if Mac had any details other than what we had been given tonight. As I brought the tray with the teapot and cups into the room, I heard him saying,

“So, he called you because he knew I would ask how he got into my house and he didn't want to have to explain.” Adam's tone was disgusted. He listened quietly for a moment and then with a chuckle he said,

“Oh yes, I'm sure he just thought the news would be easier for me to hear coming from you. The fact is, Marjorie, as usual had given no thought to how her giving out a key to my apartment to her boyfriend would affect me, and at this point, it doesn't matter anyways. I want you there if the police question either Alicia or me again; they were treating us like criminals tonight.” After another brief silence, he said,

“Okay, Mac, I appreciate you, thanks. I’ll touch base with you in the morning.” After he hung up he took the cup of tea I had poured for him and said, “I have to make one more call, babe. I’m not sure if anyone has told Marjorie’s parents, but I should call them.”

“Of course,” I said, shuddering to imagine how it would feel for a parent to get the news Adam was about to deliver. Adam punched in the number and then waited. After a few moments he said,

“Sam, I’m sorry if I woke you, it’s Adam.”

I could tell that Marjorie’s father was asking him how things were going. Adam looked almost green as he said, “Sam, I’m sorry, but I have some terrible news.” He took a deep breath and said, “Marjorie is gone, Sam. Someone killed her.”

Adam spent the next twenty minutes or so trying to answer Marjorie’s dad’s questions. He ended the call by again telling the man how sorry he was and saying that if he or his wife needed anything, they could call him. As he laid down the phone, he placed his head in his hands and rubbed his fingers across his face. I went to him and put one arm across his back and my head down close to his. With my other hand, I took his hand from his face and laid a palm on his cheek.

We sat there like that, not speaking for quite some time. The crackling of the fire was the only noise in the room until our quiet reprieve was

broken by the sound of my phone. I looked at the number and although I didn't recognize it I answered.

"Ms. Winston?" It was a man's voice I didn't recognize.

"Yes?"

"This is Matt Peterson with the *Times*. I'd like to talk to you about the murder of Marjorie Hanson."

I hung up the phone, and as I released my finger from the end button, it rang again. This time, I didn't even look at the number. I just pushed answer and yelled,

"I have no comment!" into the phone.

"I just wanted to make sure you're alright." It was Jack. Once again he was "popping up." "The murder of Adam's wife is all over the news. Are you safe, Alicia? He's not there is he?"

"Of course, he's here. I'm fine, Jack, thank you for your concern." At the sound of Jack's name, Adam looked at me and narrowed his eyes.

"Alicia, the newscasters are saying he is a person of interest. If he would kill her..." I hung up. Adam was still looking at me.

"What did he say?" Jack's words rang out in my head once again. *A person of interest*. I thought my life was a mess before. Shit.

PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

ALICIA

I awoke the next morning with a headache again. This one felt like a hangover, it hurt right behind my eyes. When they had adjusted to the

morning light coming in the window, I looked over at Adam still asleep next to me. He looked more peaceful than he had in a long time. I didn't want to wake him; he could enjoy his dreams a while longer. I slipped out underneath his arm. We'd fallen asleep on the couch and the fire had died out in the night. There was a biting chill in the room. I took the afghan off of the back of the couch and laid it gently across Adam.

I had to get showered and dressed for my meeting with Miles V at nine a.m. He was lucky he'd been let out on bail, but I was still worried he would do or say something stupid and screw it up. I gave Adam a soft kiss on his forehead and went to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee brewing. Then, after laying out my clothes for the day, I got into a hot shower. I just stood there under the water for a while, allowing the warm water to release some of the tension that had embedded itself in my tired muscles. I eventually convinced myself to finish up and get out. I was wrapping up in a towel when I heard Alex in the next room on the phone. I peeked out to see him changing into one of the suits he leaves at my place with the phone tucked under his chin.

“Alex, I was with Alicia last night, I told them that. No, I didn't give them any more information. What was I supposed to do? I realize that. I am an attorney, and I tell my client's not to speak to police without me present, but I was present. It is the same. Okay, fine, you're right. I won't speak to

them again without Mac. Yes, we are still on for lunch. I will see you at noon. Alex, do you think this has anything to do with... Okay, we'll talk about it later."

I stood silently as I listened to the last part of Adam's conversation. What did he mean by asking Alex if he thought "It" had anything to do with... With what? I closed the door quietly and hurriedly dried myself off and slipped into the robe I kept hanging in the bathroom. When I opened the door to the bedroom, he was no longer there. I found him in the kitchen pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Hi," he said with a smile when he saw me. "You want coffee?"

"Yes, please." His smile took me somewhat aback at first, but I was glad to see it.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as he handed me a mug.

"Like I drank a bottle of whiskey last night," he said with another smile. I couldn't help myself, I smiled back.

"Me, too," I told him. He sat his cup down and opened his arms. I melded into him and wished that we could stay right there like that all day.

Adam kissed the side of my face. "I better let you get ready for work."

I sighed. "Yes, I suppose I should. I heard you speaking to Alex earlier, is there anything I should know?"

Adam looked at me like he wasn't going to answer before he said, "No, honey. I'm just getting a little paranoid, I guess. I was asking Alex if he thought Marjorie's death had anything to do with my involvement with the oil spill and the Presidential campaign. We're getting so much bad press and pressure from all types of radical groups. What happened to Vick... Anyways, he assured me that what happened to Vick, and ultimately to Marjorie, are very likely not connected."

He put his hand on the back of my head, and pulling me gently towards him, he placed his lips firmly on my forehead. "Just be alert, and always careful. I couldn't bear it if anything ever happened to you."

I just nodded slowly. I didn't know what to say to that. I hadn't even considered the possibility that I might be in any type of danger. I was well aware that politics, big business, and massive amounts of money could make people do crazy things, but Adam wasn't so involved in any of it that someone would want to hurt people he was close to, was he? We were simply the attorneys...right?

I gave him a soft kiss on the lips and said, "You be careful."

My meeting with Miles was actually short and painless. He'd asked me to meet him at the bakery near my office and we talked over croissants and

coffee. He assured me that he was going to keep his mouth shut. I think the arrest had scared him a little once he was faced with the real possibility of jail time.

We set up another meeting before his arraignment the following week, and I gathered my things and headed down toward the office. I was walking across the courtyard when I saw something that stopped me in my tracks.

Two men were standing near the edge of the sidewalk. I was too far away to hear what we were saying, but the man facing me looked agitated and the man with his back to me was waving his arms as he talked. They were both well dressed, and I absolutely recognized the one facing me as Alex. The other, although I couldn't see his face, closely resembled Jack. I stood watching for a minute hoping the man would turn towards me.

They seemed to have reached a boiling point though and the man facing away from me pushed his body up against Alex in an aggressive nature. I was sure we were about to come to blows when suddenly, the other man stepped back and shoved past Alex, taking off down the sidewalk at a hurried pace.

Alex stood there watching him go for a few seconds, and then glancing in both directions quickly, he hurried across the street away from the courtyard. His eyes skimmed across me, but the courtyard was already filling with people in business attire and I don't think he realized it was me.

I was confused. I didn't think that Alex and Jack knew each other. What could they possibly have to argue about? I told myself that maybe I had been mistaken about it being Jack. After all, I hadn't seen the other man's face. Maybe it hadn't been Jack at all, but whoever it was is not a fan of Alex, that was for sure.

I continued my walk to the office, and when I saw the reporters out front, I cringed. Fortunately, our security was there, as well, and they forced the crowd to clear a path for me to the door. They couldn't stop the reporters from yelling out their intrusive and insulting questions and comments, however.

“Ms. Winston, did Mr. Hanson kill his wife? Are you sleeping with him? Were you sleeping with him while we were still together? Was he getting back together with her? Did you assault her in your office yesterday?”

I had seen plenty of media circuses in my few years as an attorney, but had never been at the center of one myself. It was disturbing, but I tried to practice what I always told my clients, “Hold your head up, act like they're not there, don't respond, and don't take any of it personally.” My own advice was harder to take than I had ever known. Just as the door was opened for me by the building doorman, Rose Dugan came up behind me and asked,

“Ms. Winston, did you kill Marjorie Hanson?”

I looked in her direction, but thankfully caught myself before I replied. Don't let her get to you, I told myself and continued into the office. I breathed a long sigh of relief as the doors swung closed behind me.

Carla was at her desk as usual with my messages sorted and ready for me. As she said good morning and handed them to me, she asked, “How are you doing?”

I smiled at her. “I see you've heard what happened last night?” When she nodded, I said, “I'm doing as well as you would expect. I do appreciate you asking.”

Once I was in my office with the door closed and hopefully the world shut out for the time being, I took out my file on Miles V. I flipped through the pages until I got to the statements that Miles IV and his daughter had given to police the day after Miles' third wife was killed. I winced as I read the words the police had taken down as they spoke to Miles IV.

“Mr. Brigham, why was your wife out climbing in the wilderness, along a steep cliff, alone?”

“Because she was a spoiled, selfish little viper,” Miles had told them, as if a matter of fact.

“And by that, you mean what?” the detective had asked him.

“Just what the hell I said. We had an argument, about money, again. She spent my money like there was going to be no end to it. We had planned on a climbing trip that day to de-stress. What a joke that was. I got to listen to her bitch and whine and pout until I could hardly stand it any longer. She gave me an out by telling me to go on and leave her alone. I did just that. When I got back to the lodge later and found out she hadn’t returned, though, I went right back out to look for her.”

“And discovered her, dead,” the detective had said. “Mr. Brigham, do you believe your wife’s death was an accident?”

“If you’re asking me if I think someone killed her, the answer is no. No one cared enough about her to even expend the energy, I think. She just shouldn’t a been out there alone. She was stupid, plain and simple. I was stupid to for leaving her out there and I feel bad about that, but you have to believe me that girl was proof positive you can take the girl outta the trailer, but you can’t take the trailer outta the girl.”

It went on like that for three pages. I sat it down for a few seconds and massaged the leftover headache behind my eyes.

I just couldn’t believe that a man could be so smart in business and finance that he had amassed a veritable fortune, and yet he could also be completely ignorant to the fact that you couldn’t just go around saying whatever you felt like, giving no consideration to what it may make people

think of you or what the consequences may be. I was about to pick the file back up to continue reading when my phone rang. It was the investigator, Brett.

“Ms. Winston, I found out why the feds are interested in David Tyler.”

“Why?” I asked, anxious to hear the answer.

“Mr. Tyler apparently has some information with regards to a fortune in missing campaign contributions. Mr. Brigham’s money was apparently not the only funds Mr. Landon had misappropriated, and Tyler has agreed to testify before the Grand Jury regarding all of that, as well as naming others that were allegedly involved.”

“Wow,” I said with a sigh. “This thing is a lot bigger than I thought.”

“Do you want me to keep digging?” Brett asked. “Maybe see if I can come up with some names of people he’s fingering, stuff like that?”

“Yes, Brett, thanks,” I told him. I hung up and tried to sort out my thoughts. I was starting to get more than a feeling that somehow everything that was happening led back to the oil spill. That was where this mess had all started. Miles was being sued by some very angry people. Vick was stealing from some very powerful people. Lots of them had motive to want Vick dead, and many of them also had motive to want Miles to be blamed for that murder.

I hated to think it, but even Alex had a stake in all of this. Once Vick was killed, Alex was able to step right into his position as campaign manager for the President of the United States. That was a position that some people would kill for.

I shook off that thought. I was being silly and as Adam had said this morning, a little paranoid. Alex was Adam's good friend. He wasn't a murderer.

I thought about Marjorie then. How did she tie in to all of this, or did she at all? Was her murder, coming so close on the heels of Vick's, just a coincidence? None of it was making much sense to my tired brain.

I looked at the clock and realized it was mid-afternoon. I hadn't eaten a thing all day. I grabbed my purse, and decided to take a walk to the sandwich kiosk down the street. As I stepped outside of the office, I took a deep breath of the fresh, cold air. The reporters had disbursed some, and the few that were left yelled out some questions at me that I let fall on deaf ears. I took my time walking. The city was decorated beautifully for the Christmas season. I strolled along and tried to lose my stress in the beauty all around me.

When I got to the kiosk, I ordered a turkey sandwich and a coffee. I took them to a bench in the little park across the street and sat down. Just as I was about to take a bite, I heard Jack's voice, again, "Hi."

I looked up at him. I didn't want to be angry or suspicious right then so I just said, "Hi."

"May I join you?" he asked, holding out a sandwich and coffee he had in his hands.

"Sure," I told him. "I'm not the best company today, though."

"It's alright," Jack told me sounding sincere. "I understand you've been through a lot. How is Adam holding up?"

I studied his face, trying to ascertain if he was still being sincere. I didn't see anything threatening there, however, so I said, "He's doing as well as can be expected, I guess. It's been a rough couple of days."

"I can't imagine," Jack said between bites of his sandwich. "The news reports are calling him a 'person of interest' in Marjorie's death. Did you see the press conference today?"

"No...what press conference?" I'd suddenly lost my appetite.

Between bites of his sandwich, Jack said, "The Chief of Detectives was asked by one of the reporters if Adam was a suspect. He said no, however, Adam was a person of interest."

I knew well from my job that being a person of interest in a murder case was not good. What it technically meant was that the police had no evidence that Adam was involved, however, they had strong suspicions about him. What it said to the public unfortunately was that Adam was

guilty, and the police just didn't have enough evidence to convict him. It was a term that could very well ruin a person's life.

I had defended a man not long ago in a civil suit who had been declared a person of interest in the death of his wife. That man had lost his job; his friends and family no longer wanted to have anything to do with him. His credit was ruined, and the worst part as far as I was concerned, was that I had firmly believed he was innocent.

"I'm sorry, Jack," I said as I got up from the bench. "I need to get back to the office."

Jack stood, as well. "I am really sorry I upset you," he said. "It wasn't my intention."

"I know," I told him. "I just need to get back to work. I'll speak to you later."

He said okay and I began to walk away. I got a few steps down the sidewalk and turned back around. "Jack, do you know a man named Alex Fritz?"

"Hmm, the name sounds familiar, but I can't place it. Who is he?" I wasn't sure, but I thought there was a slight change in Jack's demeanor. He looked worried or anxious, maybe.

"Just a friend of Adam's," I told him. "I thought maybe I saw you with him earlier today. I must have been mistaken." With that, I turned back

around and continued my walk back to the office.

I waited until I was almost a block away before glancing back again. The man I had seen arguing with Alex this morning had been wearing a black suit and overcoat. When I looked back, Jack was walking away in the other direction. The overcoat was thrown over his arm, and his black suit really stood out against the light cover of snow on the ground. I was sure it was him.

I continued on my walk back to work, stopping at a small newsstand about a block from the office. The little Chinese man who waited on me could barely speak English, yet he knew enough to point at the front page and say, "The lady looks like you."

I gave him a tight smile paid for my paper, tucking it under my arm as I went on my way. When I was back in the safety of my office, I opened it. There was Adam and I on the front page. It was mostly me since I had turned to look at Rose Dugan. Adam was holding my hand, but he was still facing the other way and trying to pull me along behind him.

The look on my face was sure to not win me any fans. Rose's question about the fight with Marjorie had thrown me off guard. I was looking at the camera with daggers in my eyes. Not exactly the face of a woman who was broken up about the loss of a life that had just taken place.

I folded it closed with the intention of tossing it in the recycle bin, but then with a heavy sigh I opened it once again. I was compelled to see what Rose Dugan had written. I hated to, but I had to admit that the girl was good. Although she used words that would float heavy suspicion around both Adam and I, she was very careful to state only facts and nothing that we could possibly use later in a libel suit.

For instance, there was no mention of the fight. It had only been witnessed by Carla and since I was sure that it must have been Marjorie who had given her the information, the informant was now dead and wouldn't be here to back it up in court if it had come to that.

My headache was growing again. I still had so much to do, both here at work and to get ready for my parents' visit. I hadn't even gone grocery shopping yet. Tossing the paper in the recycle bin where I should have put it in the first place and glancing at the gorgeous diamond that Adam had placed on my finger only the night before for strength, I got back to work.

CHAPTER TWO

ADAM

I tried to make it through the day without bothering Alicia, but it was sucking so badly about two p.m. that I had to at least hear her voice to make

it through the rest of it. Carla buzzed her for me and when Alicia answered, I instantly felt better.

“Hi, baby,” I said, “how’s your day going?”

“Well, not my best day ever,” she told me. “Better now that I’m hearing your voice. And yours?”

I sighed. “I’ve also definitely had better days. I’ve gotten about a hundred phone calls today. Some of them are saying ‘Ding Dong the Witch is dead,’ and others are acting like they believe I killed her. I suppose you’ve seen the news?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m just glad I have you,” I told her. “I wouldn’t know what to do if you decided all of this was too much. Not that I would blame you.”

“Oh, Adam, that is not going to happen. This is not your fault. You are a victim here, too.”

“Well, I definitely don’t say this often enough, but I appreciate you, and I love you, and I need you.”

“You’re right,” she said with a laugh. “You don’t say it often enough. Will you be staying with me again tonight?”

“If it’s okay. Detective Samuels called earlier. He says I can probably go home tomorrow...just in time for your parents to come into the country and not find you harboring a ‘person of interest’ in a murder case.”

Alicia groaned. I knew she couldn't be looking forward to that conversation. She changed the subject and said, "I have to go grocery shopping this afternoon. How about I make us a nice dinner?"

"Sounds like just what I need. I should be there by about seven, if that will work?"

"Perfect. And Adam..."

"Yes?"

"I love, need, and appreciate you, too,"

"I know," I said with a little laugh. "How could you not?"

I felt so much better after I had hung up the phone. I had something to look forward to tonight, something so simple, but a definite change from where my head had been at ten minutes earlier. I got back to work with the sound of her voice in my head. I could get through this, with Alicia's help.

Alicia already had the table set with candles and a hot meal waiting when I got to her place. She never fails to amaze me. I took her into my arms and just held her for a few minutes, breathing in her energy. When I let her go, I kissed her lips softly, and then my eyes landed on a copy of the *National Inquisitor* lying on the counter. Alicia's picture was on the front of it but they had done something to it with photoshop.

“Baby, why did you buy that crap?” I went over and picked it up. They had transposed a picture of Marjorie into the shot and it looked like Alicia was glaring at her. The words above it said, “Maybe Looks Can Kill.”

“I don’t know. I guess I figured it would be one less in circulation. Or, I’m a glutton for punishment. It’s awful.”

I tossed it face down on the counter. “It’s trash.”

“I know. I’m handling this all as well as I can, I promise.”

I took her back into my arms. I felt slightly ashamed that touching her was turning me on at a time like this. She just sincerely overwhelmed me.

“I’m sorry. I know you are,” I told her.

She pulled back and said, “Let’s sit down.” We took our seats at the table and she picked up her napkin as she said, “On my way home from the office, I went by the store to buy groceries. The simple and mundane task of shopping for my home made me feel better at first. It was so...normal and that was all I really wanted lately.

“All that was shattered suddenly when I got into line to pay for my things. The lady in front of me kept staring when she didn’t think I was looking, she snapped a picture of me on her phone. I was confused until I looked to the right and saw these awful rags there.”

“I’m so sorry I’ve pulled you into all of this.”

“I don’t blame you, Adam, really. It’s just...surreal, I guess.”

“Yes, it is. How about we try and make tonight as normal as we can?”

She held up her wine glass and I picked up mine. She clinked her glass to mine and said, “To normal.”

“To normal.” We drank and then started in on the delicious meal she’d made.

Afterwards, I helped her clean up the kitchen and made a fire while she got the dessert ready. She came out with two plates of strawberry shortcake, and we ate and talked about one of our cases that had nothing to do with Miles or Marjorie or anything remotely close to either of them.

Once we finished our dessert, she wanted to watch a chick flick on DVD. I agreed, but I really had other “normal” things on my mind. I was working her clothes off of her once again. I had her blouse up under her arms and was going for her bra strap when she sat up and said, “Are we finished with the movie?”

I unhooked the bra and when her breast spilled out, I took one in my hand and rolled the nipple as I looked into her eyes and said, “You can go ahead and watch it if you like.”

She sucked in a hard breath. “I might be slightly distracted by what you’re doing.”

“You want me to stop?”

She moaned. “No...not even a little bit.”

I grabbed one of her hands with my free one and pressed it to the front of my pants. “Good.” She groaned again and started rubbing me. I leaned in to kissed her hard, and at some point, I stood up and picked her up with me. She wrapped her sexy legs around my waist and I carried her down the hall to the bedroom.

I sat her down on the bed and pushed her back with my body. My tongue slipped back into her hot mouth for a few seconds before I abandoned it again to trace a line down the side of her face to her neck. She didn't seem to mind that I wasn't in the mood to be gentle. As I bit and sucked on her sensitive flesh, she moaned, whimpered, and squirmed.

I did that for a while before pulling her up and finishing undressing her. I looked her over and smiled. “Where are those shoes you wore the night we went out? The burgundy or wine-colored ones?”

She grinned and pointed at the closet. I went and got them and handed them to her. While she put them on I flattened my palm and used it to rub against her hard nipples. Once she was finished putting on those sexy shoes, I pushed her back again and let my hand find the wet treasure between her legs. She was already soaked. I fucking love how her body responds to me.

I played with her that way for a few minutes and then I flipped her over so her ass was in the air. Once again I put my hand down between her legs. I let my fingers play up and down along her slit, stopping to pinch her hard

clit and make her shiver and moan. She came up off the bed, and once again I pushed her down with my body. My hard cock pressed up against her ass and I rubbed myself against her.

“Are you going to take those clothes off?” she asked. Her words were mumbled into the comforter that her face was pushed down into.

“In a minute,” I told her. “I’m busy here.” I used one hand to continue my torture on her pussy while I slid the other one underneath her chest to grab a breast. I massaged and kneaded it and got even more excited by not only the feel of her, but the sounds she was making. I flipped her over again and took one of her hands and put it down between her legs.

She brought her feet up and I felt those sexy heels dig into my back while she began to rub her own clit. I bent down further and sucked one of her breasts into my mouth. I tickled her nipples with quick strokes of my tongue and the harder I licked the faster her hand moved between her legs. I could tell she was getting close when she breathed out a simple, “Please.”

Instead of undressing and fucking her, I moved her hand and continued sucking on her breasts while I fingered her. I slid two fingers inside of her and felt her tight walls clamp down on me as she held my head to her chest and cried out my name. I used my free hand to pick up one of her legs and put it up on my shoulder.

Then, I used my fingers to fuck her fast and hard until she was screaming in ecstasy and coming all over my hand. When she finished I pulled it out and licked my fingers, tasting her sweetness. It only made me want more.

I leaned down and put my face between her legs and began to lick and suck. She was muttering incoherently as she grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled hard while I brought her to another quick orgasm.

I let her recover, but after a few minutes, she reached up with shaky hands and unbuttoned and unzipped my pants. She pushed down on them until they were around the tops of my thighs. I stepped back and took them the rest of the way off, depositing my shirt down on top of them.

As soon as I stepped back up to the bed she reached out for me. She wrapped both of her hands around my hard cock and pulled it to her mouth. She started licking me all over like she was going after a lollipop. I stood at the edge of the bed and watched her lick and then suck and even gently graze her teeth along the underside of it, the whole while massaging my balls with one hand. She nearly put me sailing through the ceiling when she took one of my balls into her mouth and sucked on it.

I was shaking all over when I finally worked up the energy to pull back. I threw myself at her, pushing her back on the bed in one big movement. I mounted her and fucked her until we were both crying out in an orgasm that

rocked the room around us. I fell asleep wrapped up in her arms and the world went away if only for the night.

At five a.m., I was rudely awakened to the annoying sound of my phone. I should have left it in the living room. I sat up and looked around. Alicia was blinking her eyes like she was trying to wake up. “I’m sorry, baby.” I reached over and fished for my phone.

I put it to my ear and heard a strange voice say, “Mr. Hanson this is Sergeant Mason of the NYPD. We got a call from your alarm company. There has been a breach at your law office downtown. I’m afraid there was a break-in.”

“Shit! Did you catch them?”

“No, sir, but we’d like you to come down so we know if anything was taken.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

“What’s wrong?” Alicia asked, sitting up. I told her as I got dressed. She put her hands on her head and said, “When is it all going to stop?”

“I wish I knew, baby.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, baby. Your parents’ plane comes in at eight, right? I know you need to get ready for that.”

Alicia laid her face all the way in her hands and said, “God, I wish I didn’t have to explain all of this to Mother.”

“What about your father, do you think he’s going to take it any better?”

“He’s more understanding,” Alicia said. “All he has ever wanted was for me to be happy. He’ll worry about me and how all of this is affecting my life, but Mother... Well, let’s just say that she likes to give orders and issue ultimatums. If they’re not followed, then you have an argument on your hands.”

Great. I couldn’t wait to meet her. I kissed Alicia and said, “I’m sure it will be fine.” I’m a lawyer. Lying comes easy.

CHAPTER THREE

ALICIA

After Adam left, I got up and put the coffee on to brew. I made sure the guestroom was free of dust and the bathroom well stocked, and then I started getting ready to bring home the parents.

While I was dressing, I slipped off the ring on my finger and put it gently back into the velvet box it had come in. I had too much to discuss with my parents, and the ring was a conversation I felt could wait for later.

I waited nervously near terminal twelve at John F. Kennedy airport. I had been notified that the plane my parents were on was running

approximately one hour late. This made me even more nervous. I knew Mother well. She did not tolerate anything that interrupted or altered her schedule in any way, unless it was her who had changed the plan. I was already dreading having to explain all of the things that were going on in my life, without anticipating her irritable mood in the mix.

As I sat waiting for the plane to come in, I thought back to the day I had left my home to start a new life in New York. Mother, Father, and I had all waited at the airport for my plane to board. It was snowing, so the flights had all been delayed, and my mother's mood grew blacker by the hour.

She hadn't wanted me to go; she had made that abundantly clear in the weeks leading up to my departure. She had expected to win the argument, as she usually did. For one of the first times in my life, I had stood firm, though, with my father's support making me stronger. I was going to New York if I had to sit in that terminal all week before a plane was able to land and pick me up. I loved my mother, but the Lady Winston's dreams of raising a daughter who would be a socialite on the arm of some rich, handsome, successful man were just that, her dreams, not mine.

Thankfully for me, Lord Winston had raised me to be strong and independent. He encouraged me to dream big and to go after those dreams with everything I had in me. If not for his steady and constant support, my

mother may have won out. She was a hard woman to say no to, especially when she was in a mood.

The voice over the loudspeaker announcing that their flight had landed brought me back into the present. I pasted a smile on my face as the first class passengers began disembarking through the tunnel. I watched the crowd of people coming through, searching for my parents. I spotted my father first. When I saw him, I felt warm inside and for that second, I was his little girl again and all of my troubles were forgotten.

“Daddy!” I said, waving him in my direction. I caught a glimpse of Mother just to his right as they came toward me. My father waved back heartily, and I smiled and waved at Mother, as well. The wave I got in response was as if she were swatting at a fly. I felt my stomach tighten into a hard knot.

“Alicia!” Daddy took me into his strong arms and hugged me so tightly I nearly lost my breath. I didn’t care, though. I had seldom found anywhere in life that I felt as safe as in Daddy’s arms.

“Oh, my little girl,” he said as he held me back at arm’s length. “Let me look at you. I am so happy to see you!”

“I’m happy to see you, too, Daddy.” Looking Mother, I said, “I’m happy to see you, too, Mother. You look well.”

My mother leaned forward and gave me a peck on the cheek. “You look tired, dear,” she said as she looked more closely at my face.

It’s funny how a person’s parents could cause them to go from successful, confident adult to an instant child that wanted to please in mere minutes. “I’m fine, Mother,” was all I said, however. “How was your flight?”

“God awful,” The Lady Winston said with a huff. “I can’t believe they dare call that first class.”

I gave her a sympathetic look, but had to stop myself from smiling when I looked at my father’s face. He rolled his eyes and had a silly smirk painted on.

“Let’s go collect your things,” I told them, taking the carry-on my mother was holding.

We all walked over to baggage claim, where Mother continued to complain about the shoddy conditions of the airlines in the States. Her complaining prompted a porter to come to our aid, and he loaded the luggage onto a dolly for us and rolled it out to the car. After we were finally loaded and in the car Mother said,

“I assume you have a lot to tell us?” It was more a statement than a question.

I sighed. “Yes, Mother, I suppose I do. Would you mind if we waited until we get to the apartment and get you both settled, though? It’s a conversation I’d really rather not have on the Turnpike.”

Before my mother could speak, my father interjected. Glancing a silent warning at Mother he said, “Of course, dear. You tell us when you’re ready. Isn’t that fine, Diane?”

I could see my mother’s face in the rearview mirror and knew my poor dad would probably pay for that later. For now, though, she said, “Of course,” with a tight-lipped smile.

The rest of the ride was spent with chit chat and gossip about folks back home that I hadn’t seen in a while. When we reached the apartment at last, Luis was there to help and he called two young men on his staff to carry my parents’ things up to the apartment. I could tell my mother at least approved of this.

Once inside, I showed them to their room so that they could freshen up after their long flight and began brewing a pot of tea. They had both told me they weren’t hungry yet, so I just fixed a platter of croissants and pastries I had gotten at the bakery in case they wanted a small snack. Taking a deep breath, and willing myself to be strong, I headed back out to the sitting room.

As I poured the tea, we again made small talk. My father told me how much he liked my apartment and how proud he was I had done so well for myself. Unfortunately, that left an opening for Mother.

“Yes, we hadn’t been concerned about you at all dear until we started reading and seeing some things that upset us this past week.”

“I know, Mother, and I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about what was going on. I just thought it would be better if we talked face to face about it all, rather than on the phone.”

Daddy reached over and took my hand for support; I smiled at him as Mother said,

“Well, we’re here now, and we’re listening.”

I wasn’t sure where to begin, so I started at the beginning. My mother raised an eyebrow or two throughout my spiel, but didn’t interrupt. When I finished, my father squeezed my hand and said,

“I’m sure you can see how this, um, situation would concern us as parents?”

“Yes, Daddy, of course I can. It concerns me, as well, trust me. But I’m telling you that as bad as it all sounds, and as stressful as it all has been, Adam is no killer. He is a kind, loving, smart, amazing man, and I can’t wait for you two to meet him.”

“Alicia,” Mother began in that even tone she usually reserved for reasoning with people she thought were in desperate need of her advice.

“Have you considered what might happen if Adam is arrested?”

I opened my mouth and she stopped me by saying, “I’m not finished. Innocent people are accused of things all the time, dear, are they not? I’m just saying, what if he is arrested? Not only do you end up in a relationship with a man who is incarcerated, wrongly or not, but have you realized that if that were to be the case, your job could be lost, as well?”

“Mother, Adam is not going to be arrested. The police have no evidence to use to arrest him because there is no evidence to find. Adam was with me, in a crowded restaurant. He didn’t kill his wife, and the district attorney is not going to risk arresting a well-respected attorney for something he could never prove.”

“So,” my father began still in a cautious tone, “there still may be the problem of how all of this negative publicity is affecting his law practice. Do you have a back-up plan at least, sweetheart?”

“No, Daddy. Adam is my plan.” I got up and told them I’d be right back. Coming back into the room with the velvet box I saw my parents exchange a look.

“Adam asked me to marry him, and I said yes.” I took the ring out and placed it on my finger. “I will stick by his side no matter what, and we will

figure this all out together. I want to have a strong, happy marriage like the two of you. I always admired how you were partners in everything. That's what I want, and I know I can have with Adam. I need you two to have enough faith in me to know that I'm smart enough to know what I am doing here."

My parents looked at each other again. I really did admire them. They had been together so long and shared so many things in life that they almost didn't have to speak. Their thoughts were often conveyed in looks or a touch. My mother gave an almost imperceptible nod in my father's direction and he said, "Okay, sweetheart, we'll trust you. Promise us you will keep us informed, though, even when we go home. And, let us know if we can help."

I threw my arms around his neck. "I promise, Daddy, thank you!"

As I turned towards Mother, I thought I saw the slightest hint of a smile on cross her lips, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. My mother acted like she was waiting for a peck on the cheek, but when I put my arms around her neck, too, she softened for a second. Softly brushing my hair away from my face with her right hand, she put her left palm on my cheek and said, "I do hope you know what you're doing."

I could see the traces of tears that lined her pretty eyes. I wanted more than anything to fast-forward time to where this was all over and she could

see just how happy Adam can make me.

“I do, Mother. I promise.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ADAM

When I got to the office that morning, I was let in by a uniformed officer posted at the door. I made his way to the large conference room where law enforcement seemed to have gathered and introduced myself to the detective in charge.

“Sorry we have to meet under these circumstances, Mr. Hanson,” the detective told me.

“It seems that has been happening to me a lot lately,” I said with a sigh. “What happened here?”

“Well, it looks as if the thieves made their way into the building through the vents that lead from the building next door to this one. That building doesn’t have an alarm, and so breaking into it was easier. Once they got in here, they had to work pretty quickly, as the motion detectors alerted the alarm company and we had police units here in less than ten minutes.”

“Which offices did they break into?”

“We’ve checked the entire building. It seems that your main office and that of a Ms. Winston,” he said, glancing at a notepad, “were the only two where things seem to be disturbed. You can probably tell us more as you look around, however. That’s why we needed you here.”

“Okay, well, let’s get this over with.” I headed out of the conference room and across the hall to my office and the detective and uniformed officers followed me. The lock on my office door was scarred from the tools the thieves had used to force entry. I looked around as I entered the room. Papers and files were strewn across the desk and floor. The locked cabinet where I kept client case files was tipped over and had obviously been forced open. It was mostly empty. I went around to the front of my desk. The drawers had all been forced open, and the files I considered most private, mainly those involving Brigham and the oil spill case, were gone, as well.

“Damn!” I said, dropping momentarily into my desk chair. I felt like my head was going to explode. How much more was I fucking supposed to take?

“Files are missing?” the detective asked.

“Yes,” I told him. “Almost all of them. Confidential files, open cases, what a mess.” I stood up and without another word, left my office and

headed down the hall to Alicia's. Her door had been forced open and the same type of mess awaited us there.

“For specifics, you'll have to speak with Ms. Winston,” I told the detective. “But it seems that most of her files are gone, as well.”

I glanced around the office again, this time noticing that the pictures Alicia kept on the shelf above her desk were in disarray. Upon close inspection, I realized that the pictures Alicia kept here of us together at various business functions were all laying down on their face while the others were still sitting upright and facing outward. That was odd, but I didn't mention it to the policemen. I wasn't sure what it meant, but it felt personal and I couldn't bear to get Alicia any more involved in this mess than she already was.

With my lead, we checked each of the other offices. They all remained locked tight, and when I used my master key to open them, it appeared as if nothing had been disturbed in any of them.

As the cops were finishing up taking my statement, people began coming in to work for the day. The police had them all wait in the lobby or the conference room until they were finished with their evidence collection. I had to explain what had happened over and over, until finally I had a massive headache and assigned the task to Marie.

When Mac arrived, he and I began the daunting task of informing clients that our confidential files had been taken and we had no way of knowing whose hands they were now in. We also had to notify the courts. I had to wonder how many of my and Alicia's cases would just be thrown out now regardless of how well they had been going so far. When I made the call to Miles, the man was incensed.

“Do you mean to tell me that all of my personal business, including statements I have made to you behind closed doors and never meant to be public, are out there floating around somewhere with God knows who? What the hell are we going to do now?”

“I don't know yet, Miles. I'm not even sure yet how damaging this is to any of us. I assume much of it depends on who it is that has this information now.” I was as worried about those files falling into the wrong hands as Miles was. I could feel everything I'd ever worked for slowly slipping away.

Throughout the morning as I called one pissed off client after the other, Miles kept calling back with another question and each time before I got him off the phone, he would ask, “Who the hell would do this?”

“I don't know, Miles. I wish I did. The police are working on it, but it's only been a few hours.”

“You know what this will do to me?”

“Of course I do,” I answered with a heavy sigh. “I’m so sorry, Miles. I don’t know what else to say.”

“I’m sorry, too – sorry I trusted you. In this day and age, why wasn’t everything kept on the computer and password protected, anyways?” he asked gruffly.

“A lot of information is.” I tried to explain to him. “Unfortunately, the nature of our business requires us to take files of data into court with us. Most of that is written information. I promise you, Miles, nothing these people took can be used against you. It has lost any credibility just by virtue of leaving the office. The law cannot touch you based on anything you said in confidence to your lawyers.”

“What about the press? Are you gonna tell me that they can’t use this information to smear me more than they already have?”

When I didn’t instantly reply Miles continued, “I didn’t think you could,” and hung up the phone.

I sat there with my head in my hands for a while, letting the phone ring and knowing Marie would be picking it up on the other line and taking messages, none of which I’d be looking forward to hearing, I was sure.

I thought about Alicia. I hadn’t told her yet about what had been taken, and what kind of fallout we would be facing. I knew she would have her hands full with her parents today and I was trying to give her a break. The

police needed to talk to her in order to get an inventory of what had been taken from her office, but I had been able to get them to agree to wait until tomorrow. I looked around at the office I sat in at the business I had built from nothing and thought about what I might do when it all crashed down around me. I had no idea.

Mac and I had lunch behind the closed doors of my office trying to strategize about what we would do now. The phones had not stopped ringing and angry clients had even begun to show up at the office. The press was running with it and as usual were making things worse.

“Have you talked to Alicia yet?” Mac asked me.

“No, but she is my next phone call. The police aren’t going to let me stall them much longer. They say now that they need to talk to her today.”

“What about the open cases? Will we have to talk with each judge independently to know how to proceed?”

“I’m afraid so,” I told him. “I have Nico and Kyla working on compiling a list right now. Once that is done, we’ll arrange a meeting that includes the clients, not just ours but in the civil cases, the other side, our attorneys, and the individual judges and in the criminal cases, of which we thankfully don’t have many, the district attorney will have to be invited.”

Marie stuck her head in the room. “Excuse me, Mr. Hanson, I have Ms. Winston on the line.”

I exchanged a look with Mac who took the hint and said, “I’ll meet up with you when that list is ready.” He left with Marie and she closed the door behind them.

“Hi, babe,” I said when I picked up the line.

“Hi, how’s it going with the police? Was anything taken?”

“I’m afraid so, Alicia. My office and yours were the only ones breached. They took all of our files.”

“Oh my God, Adam! We have all of that information on people who hired us and trusted us to keep issues private? Oh my God!”

“Calm down, sweetheart,” I told her. “I know it sounds really bad, but we’ll fix this, I promise.”

“Are the clients aware?”

“Yes, most of them have been notified. They have been calling or showing up all day. It’s like a three-ring circus around here. Alicia, I’m sorry, but the police need to speak to you, today.”

“Great, that will make my parents’ day,” she said with a sigh. “Adam, why are all of these things happening to us?”

“I don’t know, baby. But we’ll fix it, okay?” I knew it wasn’t much, but it was all I could think of to say right now.

I had thought a lot today about how I had struggled to get through law school on scholarships and student loans. I had worked twenty hours a day sometimes as an associate at the first law firm that hired me, until I finally made partner, and then when I had finally saved enough I had opened my own firm and brought Mac on as a partner.

It had been, up until today, the most successful and respected firm in Manhattan. I knew that if I had accomplished all of that once, I could do it again. I really did plan on fixing it all somehow. I knew too, that it would all be easier with Alicia by my side.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALICIA

I was numb and in shock when hung up the phone with Adam. I didn't want to imagine what this was going to do to the firm's reputation...to all of our reputations. I also had no idea how I was going to tell my parents. It was just all too much. Adam told me he would have the detectives come back in two hours. That would at least give me a chance to arrange lunch for my parents and give them some type of explanation as to why I had to leave them already. This was another conversation that I was not looking forward to at all.

I arrived at the law office a little earlier than Adam told me to. Once again, the sidewalk out front was congested with reporters. I slipped in the back way this time and took the service elevators up to the floor that housed the firm. I went straight to Adam's office, and although Mac, Kyla, and Nico were there when I arrived, Adam got up and put his arms around me. We stood there like that for several minutes and then I finally pulled back and said,

“Are we working on a plan?”

“That's exactly what we're doing,” Kyla told me. “Pull up a chair and help us out. Another great mind is always welcome.”

I sat down and Nico began explaining to me what they were doing. Nico, Kyla, and a few of the junior associates had compiled a list of all my and Adam's open cases. Then, they separated them into civil and criminal cases.

As it turned out, Miles' and Nelson's cases had been the only open ones that Adam or I had been working on as a criminal case. The oil spill lawsuit was a different story. Adam, Mac, and our teams had spent hundreds of hours interviewing and taking depositions on witnesses. Most of that information was in the files that had been taken. They had listed out the names of all of the people involved in those interviews and also had a list of

all of the judges involved on cases that have already been assigned and the attorneys representing the other side.

“Wow, you guys have been busy. Great job,” I told them when Nico had finished. “I don’t know that I have anything else to offer until I’ve seen what the damage is in my office. If you’ll all excuse me, I think I’ll take a look now, before the police arrive.”

When I opened the door to my office, I was sickened at the sight. The damage that had been done originally was compounded by the trail left by the police during their investigation. Black powder used for picking up fingerprints could still be seen on the door the desk and other furniture in the office. As I stood there, trying to decide where to start, I heard Adam’s voice behind me.

“What a mess, huh?”

I turned towards him and said, “I’m not even sure where to start.”

He put his arms around me again and held me longer this time. “It’s going to be alright, baby, I promise.”

I didn’t say anything, just stood there with my head resting against his chest. I wished we could go back to when our love was new and business was thriving. I’d even be happy to have to deal with Marjorie’s nonsense again, if it only meant that the old shrew was still alive to antagonize us. Life had gotten so complicated so fast. I was a pro at handling other

people's messes and drama, but I wasn't quite sure how to handle my own at that point.

Up until a month ago, life had more often than not come easily to me. Yes, my mother could be difficult at times, but my parents had given me every advantage in life and had done an excellent job of shielding me from the bad things.

Adam held me back so he could look at my face. "Is this the final straw?" he asked, looking genuinely afraid that I might say yes.

"Of course not," I told him. "None of this is your fault. Now, let me take stock of what is missing before the police get here."

"Okay, but there's one more thing," he told me, "I don't know what if anything this means, but the pictures you have of you and I on the shelf behind your desk were all laid face down."

My eyes went to the shelf. "Why? That seems a bit...personal, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "It does, and I don't like it." I got a chill down my spine. I didn't like it, either. What the hell was going on?

Adam left me alone after that and by the time the police arrived, I had compiled a list of what was missing. I had been working on two civil cases; one was a woman who was suing a large corporation for the wrongful death of her husband. He had been on the company's private jet on the way to a

business meeting when the jet had crashed. The company had not compensated the woman in any way, other than a very small life insurance policy they held on her husband.

I had found out that the pilot who had been flying the jet had been drinking earlier in the day, prior to the flight taking off. The FAA had investigated and found the cause of the crash to be equipment failure, but I thought that the pilot drinking prior to a long business flight was still significant and could be used to force the company to compensate the widow.

My other civil case was a domestic one. The husband hired a private investigator to follow the wife, who in this case was my client. The wife was cheating on him, and the man was trying to use the infidelity to keep basically everything they had accumulated together over a period of fifteen years of marriage. I disagreed with the infidelity, but did not believe it entitled the man to take everything that the woman had helped work for.

The two criminal cases, Miles' and Nelson's, were the most complicated. In Nelson's case, since we were already in the stages of going to trial, I could get most of what we lost from court documents or the DA's office.

In Miles' case I'd have no such luck and it was going to suck. We would have to re-interview anyone that had already been interviewed and

re-compile a case file. We would probably also have to fight the press. It made me crazy just thinking about it.

In that file were the documents Miles had given me at the beginning, as well. There was background on Vick, information Brett had found for me on David, and most damaging of all was Miles IV's admission that his son had killed his third wife. It wasn't enough for the police to arrest Miles V on, but it would be damaging in other ways if the file was in the wrong hands.

I spoke to the detectives when they arrived and gave them a run-down of what was taken. The nature of their job made them inquisitive about who the clients were, but I stuck firm on only telling them what type of case file it had been.

I called my own clients myself. The two women weren't happy, but they were reasonable and seemed to understand that I was doing all I could. I left a message for Miles and had to reassure Nelson ten times that this wouldn't be his ticket to jail. It was an exhausting afternoon.

When I finally finished all of that, I said goodbye to Adam and told him I would call him later. I needed to get back to face the music once again with my parents. I could only hope that they hadn't watched or listened to any news while I'd been gone.

When I got home and opened the apartment door, I was surprised to hear a voice other than one of my parents. It was Jack. I thought about just sneaking back out. I could only imagine what sort of ideas he was filling my Mother's head with about Adam. I was beginning to distrust him and as much as I hated that my instincts told me it was the safe thing to do.

"Jack," I said as I walked into the sitting room where they were all having coffee. "What a surprise."

"Alicia," Jack said, rising from his seat next to my mother, "I'm sorry to just drop by unannounced. I didn't realize your parents were visiting. I had just been watching the news, and I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"That is actually what phones were invented for," I said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Alicia," my mother chimed in. "There is no reason to be rude. You owe Jack an apology for your tone."

"It's okay, Lady Winston," Jack said. Ever the ass-kisser, I thought. "I know she's had a rough go of it lately. I am the one who should apologize and get going. I'm intruding."

"You are doing no such thing!" Mother told him. "We were happy to see you and catch up. If my daughter won't apologize for her rudeness, I will."

“Mother, I can apologize for myself, thank you.” Looking at Jack and pasting the second non- genuine smile of the day on my face, I said, “You’re right, Jack. It has been rough week. I do apologize if I’ve been rude.”

“No need, Alicia, really,” Jack said, oblivious to the fact that I had said “If I’ve been rude.” I hadn’t actually admitted to anything. I felt he was the one being rude just by virtue of being there.

“All I want is to be sure you’re okay,” he said again.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I said, and took a seat next to my father.

My dad took my hand. “Are you really, dear? We saw on the television that your office was broken into.”

“It’s awfully frustrating yes, but we can deal with it. Now, enough depressing talk. How about I put what I had out for dinner tonight in the refrigerator until tomorrow and we go out to a nice restaurant? I’d love to take you to see Rockefeller Center. You haven’t ever been there around the holidays, have you?”

“No, we haven’t,” my mother said, “What do you think, John? Are you up for a stroll out in the cold tonight?” I knew that my father had had some medical issues lately. It was touching to see that my mother still worried about him after all these years.

“I would love to see all of the Christmas decorations and watch the skaters out on the ice,” my father said, enthusiastically.

“It’s settled then. I know of an excellent seafood restaurant near there. I’ll call for reservations now, and that will give us time to dress.”

“I better be on my way, then,” Jack said, rising once again off of the sofa.

My mother gave me a look that I knew full well meant I was being rude again and should offer Jack an invitation, but I pretended not to see it and said instead, “It was nice of you to come by, Jack. Perhaps we can have you over again before my parents return home.”

“That would be nice,” he said. He kissed my mother on the cheek and shook my father’s hand. I walked him to the door and as he was leaving he said, “Don’t forget that you can call me if you need anything.”

“I won’t, thank you,” I said as I closed the door.

There was something about him that bothered me so badly lately, but I just couldn’t figure out what it was. I shook it off for now, and returned to my parents. I was looking forward to our outing. It would be nice to forget about everything for a while and just enjoy our time together.

CHAPTER SIX

ADAM

I returned to my penthouse that evening. It was creepy being there, knowing that Marjorie's dead body had been here only a few days prior. I didn't believe I would ever be able to use the bathroom where they had found her again. Thankfully, the penthouse offered two other choices.

I mixed myself a drink and after taking off my suit jacket and tie, I sat down on the couch to watch the news. The break-in at the firm was the top story of the evening. The news anchors of course had to link what had happened to the "recent murder" of the "firm's leader."

They re-hashed the sordid details of Marjorie's death and even included an interview with that rat-bastard Hal Rogers. He told the story of how he was helping this poor woman fight in court for what was legally hers and made me out to sound like some kind of Simon Legree in the process. He said that when she had finally gotten some "small" resolution, someone had viciously taken her life. He worked up a tear as he said how his heart went out to her family and what a tremendous loss to society her death would be. I wanted to throw my drink at the television.

Rogers hadn't said a word about how he happened to be screwing poor, dead Marjorie while trying to help her steal every dime she could from me, whether I deserved it or not. He also hadn't mentioned how large his cut of what Marjorie had gained was. I knew it was upwards of a million dollars.

The bastard was using Marjorie's death and now what was happening at my firm as publicity for his ramshackle practice.

I drained my glass and started to turn off the TV. As I picked up the remote, however, I heard the bleached-blond anchorman with the too-white smile say,

“This just in, it seems that a source close to the investigation of the break-in at the Hanson law firm has said that information from one of the files had just been released to the authorities. This source also said that the information this file contained held clues to an unsolved murder. Keep watching as the story unfolds for up to the minute details.”

I flipped off the set. The sounds of my world crashing down around me could almost be heard out loud now. Once Miles realized the “information” they were talking about was probably his son, he alone would make sure that I never practiced law again in this city.

I knew that I should call Alicia. I didn't want her to see her client's business splayed across the evening news. She took her work and her clients' privacy to heart. This was going to upset her badly. It would be better if she heard it from me. I reluctantly reached for my phone just as it started to ring. The caller ID said it was Alex.

“Hey,” I answered, actually looking forward to hearing a friendly voice.

“Hey, buddy, I’ve been listening to the news. I’m sorry; it seems like everything that could go wrong for you lately has. How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know, Alex. This all really sucks, you know?”

“I know. You have to keep your chin up, though, and believe that you’ll get through this. I have faith in you.”

I laughed – it was the alternative to completely losing it. “I think you and maybe Alicia are the only ones in the greater Manhattan area who still feel that way.”

“Whatever I can do to help,” he told me.

“Have you seen Miles today?”

“I spoke with him a while ago. I’ll bet he gave you hell about all of this, huh?”

“That’s putting it mildly. I’m afraid of what he will do when he hears what the press is saying we have now.”

“Yeah, it’s about Miles V, right?”

“It has to be. We didn’t have anything else even remotely that damaging to anyone else in those files that were taken.”

“Is it enough for the authorities to arrest him, you think?”

“No, but it will definitely prompt them to reopen the case, I believe.”

“What about the civil case?” Alex asked. “How damaging will the files being public be to Miles’s business, if that were to happen?”

“Like the black plague,” I said with a sigh. “Alex, there were things in there to indicate that Miles and all of the executives knew their tankers weren’t up to code. If that gets out, we’re all screwed.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. Again, if there’s anything I can do...”

“I’ll let you know, thank you.”

“No problem,” Alex told me. “Get some rest, huh?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, hanging up the phone and looking around the penthouse that I used to love. It smelled like death to me now. “I’m sure I’ll do that.”

I didn’t call Alicia. After talking to Alex, I decided it was too late and I would call her in the morning. I hoped that she had been too busy with her parents to have watched the news. I would try to catch her early in the morning before she saw the paper. I went to bed missing her, remembering the last night we spent together. I loved the way she smelled and the soft feel of her skin and her hair. God, I hoped that all of this drama wouldn’t drive her away – or worse yet home to the UK. I needed her now, more than ever.

In the morning before I called Alicia, she called me. “Hi, baby,” I said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Would have been so much better with you curled up by my side,” she said.

“Ditto over here, too.”

I was about to ask if she heard the news when she said, “Adam, I got a phone call this morning, from David.”

“David? What did he want? How did he get your number?”

“I asked him that, he never gave me an answer. He says he wants to meet with me. He claims he has some information that I need.”

“You’re not meeting with him alone. This guy has a finger in everything that’s been going on lately. I don’t trust him.”

“Me neither,” she said. “But I’m really interested in what he has to say. He mentioned Jack, Adam. Isn’t that strange?”

“I knew that guy was up to no good. What did David say exactly?”

“He was really cryptic about it all. He said he had some things I’d really like to discuss with you, in person. When I asked what things he said they involved my clients the Brigham’s, my boyfriend Adam Hanson, and my ex-boyfriend, Jack Grant.”

I tried to let the ex-boyfriend go, I really did. It wasn’t important now. But before I caught myself I said, “I thought you and Jack were only ever

friends.”

“We were. We dated for a minute in high school and that was it. Adam, this is no time for jealousy.”

“I know, babe, I’m sorry. Listen, tell him you’ll meet with him, but only if I can be there as well, okay? Don’t agree to go alone, promise me.”

“Okay, I promise,” she said.

“Did you happen to see the news?”

She groaned. “Yeah, actually the morning paper. I found my father reading it when I got up.”

I felt so fucking bad for all of this. I have no idea why she’s still with me. “What did the paper have to say?”

“The article began by re-capping Marjorie’s murder. It called you a person of interest and referred to me as your “Love Interest.” After all of that, they finally got to the break-in. They knew that my office and yours were the only ones broken into and the reporter speculated on what, if anything this may have to do with Marjorie’s death. They talked about possible ramifications on our open cases and then they talked about Miles.”

I groaned. “Specifically?”

“Yeah, too specifically. They quoted things out of his file – most sickeningly when he said, ‘My son killed my wife.’”

“Shit.”

“Yep.”

“What did your parents say about all of this? Are they ready to kidnap you and take you back to the U.K.?”

“Mother didn’t read it. Hopefully, she won’t get a chance. My father is more understanding. We had a great evening together last night and Mother is in a great mood. I plan on trying to keep her that way.”

“Good luck, baby. I love you. Let me know what David says.”

“I will. I love you, too. I miss you.”

“I miss you like an amputated limb. When this is all over, we need to find a new place to live, together.”

“Really?”

“You’re still marrying me, right? We might have to go to Vegas because I’ll be destitute...”

She laughed. “I’d marry you on the street in Brooklyn. I love you. I can’t wait to be your wife. I will see you in a few hours. I got my parents tickets to the Met and after I drop them off, I’ll be into the office.”

“I can’t wait to see you,” I told her honestly. It was what would get me through another wretched day.

I showered and dressed after I spoke to Alicia and headed into the office. I had a meeting at nine a.m. with the judge presiding over Brigham’s

civil case and I wanted to be well-prepared. Judge Newman was a no-nonsense type. When I made it into court, I found him not amused, at all.

“Pretty shoddy alarm system you must have over there, Hanson. Thieves in and out with over twenty files before the authorities arrived? You’ll be lucky if this doesn’t destroy you, boy.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, feeling as if I were sitting in the principal’s office in middle school. “I’m hoping that’s not going to be the case, however.”

“Well, for now, I haven’t found any reason not to proceed on this case as we have been. I’ll have the jury sequestered if need be to keep them from being tainted by the press. Meanwhile, I don’t want my courtroom made into a circus by you and Rogers.”

Hal Rogers was the attorney for the plaintiffs in the oil spill case. Somehow, I just couldn’t get away from that clown. He hadn’t been able to make it to the meeting this morning, so it was almost postponed. Instead, he sent an associate and said he “trusted” me and Judge Newman not to have any ex-parte discussions. The associate was there just mainly to make sure things were kept legal, and the court stenographer was busy taking it all down as the judge and I talked.

“It won’t be, sir, I assure you,” I told him sincerely. I just wanted to get back to business as usual, if that was going to be possible. I glanced over at Cyrus, the associate Hal had sent in his place.

“No theatrics, Judge,” Cyrus assured. “Mr. Rogers is very serious about this case and the press is only a distraction to him, as well.”

“Okay then,” Judge Newman told us. “We will commence with the opening statements on Monday as planned. Thank you for coming, gentlemen.”

Cyrus and I both thanked the judge and went separate directions after leaving his chambers.

As I was leaving, I met Mac coming up the steps of the courthouse.

“I’m sorry, I got held up in traffic,” he told me. “How did it go?”

“Good, I think. He agreed we could go on with the case as if none of this had happened, as long as we promise not to create a circus in his courtroom, as he put it.”

Mac chuckled. “Did you tell him we would try, but we can’t speak for that clown, Rogers?”

I laughed. “I would have, if I thought the judge had a sense of humor,”

“So, how about we get an early lunch, or late breakfast? I’m starved.”

“I’m going to pass, thanks,” I told him. “I have something kind of important I need to take care of.”

I left the courthouse and headed for the office. After checking in with Marie, I returned a few calls, and then asked her to let anyone who was looking for me know that I’d be in conference the rest of the afternoon. I

then called Romaletti's and made a few arrangements. I hoped Alicia didn't have a big lunch while she was out with her mother; I had plans for her this afternoon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALICIA

After I hung up with Adam, I showered and dressed. I was nervously waiting for David to call back. When he did, I told him what Adam said and the little bastard laughed.

“Afraid to meet me alone, are you? I find that laughable, considering the people you’ve been keeping company with lately. They are quite a collection of murderers and thieves.”

“When and where?” I wasn’t in the mood to engage him in his mind games.

“Friday morning, six a.m., at the café attached to the Motel 6 off of Highway 414.”

“Okay, we’ll be there.” I hung up quickly. For some reason, talking to that man made me feel dirty.

After breakfast, my mother and I went out to do some more Christmas shopping. We planned to meet my father at the Met just before two, and then I would go into the office and hopefully spend the afternoon getting some work done.

We had yet to hear back from the judges on our open cases. I didn’t even know if I had cases any longer or if we’d be thrown out or reassigned. I also had to call Miles IV. That was not a conversation I was looking forward to at all. I did my best to put it all out of my mind for the duration of the morning. For the most part, I did a good job and we had a nice time. Mother is an acquired taste, but I do love her, and I realized having her all to myself for a few hours that I’d really missed times like that.

I dropped her at the Met at one-thirty, so she and Daddy could find their seats before the show began. My father had used a car service and the driver would be picking them up and returning them to the apartment after the show. I made plans to meet them back there for dinner that evening after I finished up at work. I headed downtown to the office from there; traffic was light and I made it there in only fifteen minutes.

When I arrived, I wasn't surprised to find Carla hard at work at her desk. I opened my office door, expecting to see the same mess I had last time. I should have known better. With Marie and the housekeeping staff's help, Carla had scrubbed and shined every visible piece of furniture. The carpet had been cleaned and the place looked and smelled like brand new. I could almost forget what had happened the day before until I began sorting through the messages Carla had left on my desk. Just as I was about to start returning calls, my phone rang. Not waiting for Carla, I picked up the call,

“Alicia Winston,”

“Hi, it's your boss, and your fiancé, though not necessarily in that order,” Adam said on the other end. “Do you have time to come up to the roof?”

“Excuse me?” I said with a giggle. “The roof?”

“Yes, please,” was his simple reply, and then he hung up. I looked at the phone in my hand in disbelief.

I took the service elevator to the top of the building and then the stairs to the roof access. The building was thirty stories tall, and the view was beautiful above the line of smog that usually hung over the city. I looked around for Adam, and found him standing next to a small folding table. It was covered with a white linen tablecloth that held a vase in the center with a beautiful red rose. On either side of that sat two covered silver serving trays, and a basket of bread that smelled so fresh it made my mouth water.

“What is all of this?”

Adam bowed slightly at the waist and said, “Your lunch is served, my lady.” He pulled out my chair, and I sat down. I was smiling so hard it almost hurt. I couldn’t believe with all he was going through that he had done this for me.

Adam sat across from me and clapping his hands gently twice, he summoned our waiter. It was Romaletti’s best waiter. He came right over and removed the tops from our trays. My senses were assaulted at once by the delicious aroma of shrimp linguini. The waiter popped the cork on a bottle of wine and poured us each a glass.

When I looked at Adam, he said, “I think we deserve just one glass, Tony here has coffee for us afterwards.”

“Well, in that case...” I lifted my glass. Adam lifted his, as well, and as we clinked them together he said,

“To us.”

“To us,” I agreed.

Before Tony discreetly disappeared, he lit an outdoor furnace that must have been brought out for the occasion. Adam had thought of everything. We dined and made small talk about my visit thus far with my parents, both of us were careful to leave the serious talk for later.

After we finished our entrée, Tony reappeared with dessert. Although I had thought I'd not be able to eat another bite, the chocolate volcano Tony sat before me with a steaming cup of coffee on the side proved too much to resist. After we finished dessert, a soft music began playing and Adam stood and asked, “May I have this dance?”

I gave him my hand, and we danced slowly to the music, both of us trying to live only in this moment. As the music came to an end, Adam kissed me softly. That one soft kiss ignited a passion in us both, and Adam led me over to the side of the roof where a small tent had been set up. I raised an eyebrow.

“I was hoping...”

I smiled and nodded, and he led me inside. The music started up again as he lay me down on a soft air mattress covered with a feather blanket. He kissed my eyelids, my nose, my cheeks, and my ears before starting on my neck. He nuzzled his face into my soft flesh, causing me to moan.

My moans urged him on, and he began to unbutton my blouse slowly, kissing each part of my chest as he did so. He kissed and tickled my stomach softly with his tongue as he pushed away the fabric of my blouse, running his fingers softly across the tops of my breasts. I arched my back, and he slipped his hand underneath me, unhooking my bra and allowing my breasts to escape. He moved his mouth back up and used it to set my body on fire.

When I couldn't take it any longer, I began to pull at the fabric of Adam's shirt and pants. I suddenly needed to feel his hot flesh against mine. He stood up and stripped down as I finished doing the same.

Neither of us felt the cold as we lit our own fire in each other's bodies, making love that went from soft and gentle to passionate and urgent. When we finished, our bodies were glistening with sweat – in New York City in December at the top of a thirty story building.

I lay there in Adam's arms, never wanting this day to end. Unfortunately, however, it would have to. I promised my parents I'd be home for dinner with them, and I couldn't disappoint them. I had a sudden idea though.

“How'd you like to come to dinner tonight and meet the parents?” I asked Adam.

The look he gave me was almost comical. “Really?”

“Yes, really, I think it’s about time, don’t you?”

Adam sat up and scratched his head. “Well, since I just ravaged their daughter out in the open in broad daylight I suppose I do owe them at least a meeting.”

I laughed. “I think we should leave that part out of the conversation tonight, okay?”

“Okay, if you insist,” Adam said with a grin. “I’ll have to come up with another opener.”

I pulled him back down and kissed him hard. “Thank you so much for all of this; it was so wonderful,”

“You are very welcome,” he said. “When all of this craziness has passed, we’ll do things like this all the time, I promise.” Then, turning more serious he continued, “Will you really still want to marry me if we have to start over?”

I propped myself up on one elbow. “Of course I will. I hope you know that money and power are not what’s important to me here. I want to be with you. We can work on the rest of it together, right?”

“Right,” he said with a smile. “Thank you.”

After we dressed and straightened up a bit, we went back inside. Tony had somehow cleared up the table and the dishes while we were...otherwise

engaged. I was suddenly embarrassed at the thought that maybe he heard us. I'd forgotten all about him.

“What are you thinking?” Adam asked me. “You’re blushing.”

“I was just wondering if Tony...”

“He’d be too discreet to say so if he did,” Adam assured me.

“I know,” I said, still just a little embarrassed, but thinking it had been worth it either way.

Once I got back to my office, I managed to get a few calls returned and some paperwork done before having to leave for dinner with my parents. I hadn’t been able to reach Miles. Although I wasn’t looking forward to talking to him, I really just wanted to get it over with. I left him messages on his cell, at his home, and at both of the offices I had numbers for. He still hadn’t called back by the time I left to go home.

I stopped by Adam’s office on my way out and quickly filled him in on my second conversation with David that morning. I told him where David wanted to meet. “That is the hotel where the Feds are keeping him, right?”

“Yes, that was where Brett had told me he was,” I said.

“Well, at least we know it will be safe,” Adam smiled. “We’ll be surrounded by law enforcement.”

“Comforting,” I said, somewhat sarcastically. The whole situation felt so covert and surreal to me. I really, really just wanted things to go back to

normal.

I made it home around five thirty. My parents had had a terrific time at the show and were both in a very good mood, even my mother. I had the shrimp from the night before still marinating. I put it under the broiler and prepared rice pilaf and asparagus to go with it. My mother came in to help set the table, and that was when I told her that Adam would be joining us. She almost seemed sincere as she said, “Oh, how nice.”

I added some fresh sliced fruit to a bowl of whipping cream and put it in the freezer to set for dessert. Lastly, I picked a bottle of white wine that I knew both of my parents liked. As I was setting the basket of sourdough bread out, the doorbell rang. I heard Daddy call out that he would get it, and I said to myself, “Here we go...”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADAM

I was forty years old and the last time I met any parents was twenty years ago when I met Marjorie's. It took a hell of a lot to make me nervous, but this did it. I took forever getting dressed. I didn't want to show up in a black suit and look like I was going to a funeral, but the lightest one I had was a dark blue. I had this thing about light suits making me look like a car

salesman. I put on the dark blue one and changed my tie four times, finally settling on a light blue paisley.

I stopped at the florist and bought two bouquets of flowers, one for Alicia and the other for Lady Winston. Then I went by the smoke shop and picked up a cigar for Lord Winston. On top of meeting parents, these two had to be a Lord and a Lady. My stomach was having convulsions.

When I got to Alicia's apartment building, Luis met me at the door. "Don't you ever have a day off?" I asked him.

He smiled and said, "I work a lot of overtime. I have five kids to feed."

I whistled. "Wow, five! That's a lot of kids."

"Tell me," he said. "The wife is Catholic. Who knows, we might end up with ten."

I laughed and clapped him on the back. "You're a better man than me, Luis."

He wished me a good evening before I nervously rode the elevator up to Alicia's floor. I was hoping she'd at least answer the door. Just looking at her pretty face calms me. The Lord Winston pulled it open instead.

"Well, hello there," he said in an accent much stronger than his daughter's. "You must be Adam."

"Yes, sir," I tried juggling the flowers so I could shake his hand.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m John and it’s nice to meet you.” He smiled warmly.

“You, too, sir.”

“John.”

“John,” I said. I didn’t want to call him John. It felt wrong somehow, too casual. I stepped inside and saw Alicia in about twenty-five years come around the corner. Lady Winston was the spitting image of her daughter, only with darker hair and a few more lines around her eyes.

“Hello there,” she said.

I held out the flowers that were hers and she took them. I took the hand she offered and brought it to my lips. “Lady Winston, it is such a pleasure to finally meet you.” Alicia’s mother at least seemed pleased with my manners.

“The pleasure is mine, Adam. I’m so happy you could join us tonight. The flowers are lovely, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now that I have a free hand, sir, I have something for you, too.”

I pulled out the cigar and Alicia’s dad said, “John,” again before taking it. He brought it to his nose and slid it underneath and inhaled. “My favorite, how did you know?”

“I have to give Alicia credit. I texted her earlier and asked.”

“Well, thank you anyways, it was very thoughtful of you.” I looked up then and saw Alicia standing in the dining room door looking at me. She was wearing a green sweater dress that brought out the green in her hazel eyes and her hair was down around her shoulders. I wished we were alone suddenly.

“Hi, baby,” she said.

“Hi. You look beautiful.”

“So do you,” she told me. “Are the flowers for me?”

“Oh yeah.” I handed her the orchids.

“They’re beautiful, thank you. Dinner is ready.” She took her mother’s flowers and brought both bouquets back in a vase. We all took a seat at the table. I wasn’t sure I could eat. My stomach was doing cartwheels. Alicia’s father sat at the head of the table with Alicia to his right and Alicia’s mother to his left. That left me between Alicia and her mother.

I did my best to make conversation with her and after I asked her a few questions about her hometown in England and what charities she was involved in, she seemed to warm up to me. She asked me about myself and I told her I was born and raised in New York, that both my parents had passed away, and I didn’t have any siblings. I complimented her necklace and earrings and by the time we finished our main course, I think she was almost flirting with me.

The nerves were beginning to recede if for no other reason than Alicia's calming presence. Her father didn't talk much, but when he did it was with warmth or humor. I decided quickly that I really liked him. He seemed like the kind of man I could be good friends with someday.

After dinner, Alicia sent her parents out to the sitting room with a fresh carafe of coffee and I helped her cleaned up the kitchen. "That went okay... so far," I said with a grin. "I think your mother actually likes me."

"How could she not? You were so charming." She smiled at me and continued, "And handsome."

I couldn't stand it any longer. I grabbed her and holding her tightly I kissed her on the lips,

"I've wanted to do that since I got here."

"Me, too," she said.

Once we finished in the kitchen, Alicia fixed a tray of dessert cups along with the frozen fruit and cream and brought it into the sitting room with us. I helped her father stoke the fire and when we were all seated comfortably, her mother finally said,

"So, Adam, Alicia tells us you've asked her to marry you?"

I looked at Alicia and then back at Lady Winston, "That's true; it would make me the happiest man on earth."

Alicia's mother smiled. "Well, that is a good answer. I have to say, however, I hope you can see how we might be worried about your futures based on what has been going on lately in your lives?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I would absolutely be concerned if it were my own daughter. All I can tell you is the truth. I love your daughter more than I've ever loved anything or anyone. I promise you that I will always love her and take care of her needs. She and I are an awesome team and I believe that with Alicia by my side, I can rebuild my practice to be even more successful than it was before."

Alicia's father said, "I'm glad to hear all of that, son. A marriage is a partnership. For better or worse aren't just words. What you're going through now may just be scratching the surface of what is yet to come of the worse. The important thing is that you see you and Alicia as a team. As long as you keep seeing it that way, I believe you two will make it as well."

Happily, for me at least, that was the last of the serious talk for the evening. We chatted and laughed and played a game of scrabble before I finally announced that I should be going if I were going to be able to get up for work the next day. Alicia walked me out.

"Thank you so much for coming. I think they really like you. I knew they would," she told me.

“I’m glad. I like them, too. They did a great job with you. That was something they had going for them right from the start.”

She laughed and before she turned to go back inside she turned serious and said, “Don’t forget our meeting with David in the morning.” I hadn’t forgotten it. I was just trying not to dwell on it. It seemed the more I knew about the Brigham case, the less I wanted to.

“I won’t,” was all I said to her. I didn’t want to end the wonderful night on a depressing note. I put my arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. It was a long, languid one and we were both breathless when we pulled apart. “Damn, I wish you were coming home with me.”

“Me, too,” she said. “Goodnight, love.”

“Goodnight.”

I watched as Luis’s nighttime counterpart called the elevator down for her before I took my keys from the valet and headed home. I couldn’t wait until the day that her home was mine and vice versa. I would never want ten kids...or even five, but I have begun to like to think about having at least one or two with Alicia. We’d never talked about children so I’m not really sure how she feels about it, but if she’s open to it, so am I.

CHAPTER NINE

ALICIA

I was still smiling as the elevator doors closed to take me back up to the apartment. I could tell Adam was nervous when he first got there tonight, but as usual, he'd charmed the pants off of everyone in the room. The elevator stopped on the second floor and a man stepped on. It took me a second to realize it was Miles IV. "Mr. Brigham, what are you doing here?" I asked, feeling very uncomfortable.

"You and I need to talk, young lady." He looked – and smelled – as if he had been drinking heavily.

"Why don't you come into the office and see me in the morning? I'll be there by nine." Miles pushed the stop button on the elevator. I was beginning to feel panic well up inside of me.

"What are you doing?"

"I said we need to talk. The papers and the television are smearing my family's name all across this State. I'm up on charges for a murder I didn't commit. My son will probably be arrested soon for a murder he probably did commit, but no one was supposed to know about, and all of the information my company has kept private and personal for years will probably pop up any day now. You and your damn boss are responsible for all of that, and I want to know what you plan to do about it."

My heart was racing and I could feel the sweat on my palms. I stood my ground though.

“Mr. Brigham, I will forgive you for this, just this once, because I believe you have had too much to drink. In the future, however, if you wish to speak with me, you will use the phone and make an appointment to see me at my office. Now, I have company waiting for me in my apartment and would appreciate it if you would press that button and get us moving again. If you choose not to do so, I will press the emergency button and you can explain to the police why you felt it was okay to trap me here against my will.”

Miles looked at me and smiled. “I like your balls, young lady,” he said before pushing the button for my floor. We rode up without speaking further, but as I stepped out, he said, “I’ll be calling you for that appointment.”

“That’ll be fine,” I told him.

I waited for the elevator doors to close before turning my back on him. The hairs on the back of my neck were still standing up. I thought about calling Adam and telling him, but decided to let him rest easy tonight. I would tell him in the morning.

I told Adam about Miles on our way out to meet with David. “He’s so used to using intimidation in his business and family dealings, he probably

thought it would work with you, too. Way to go putting him in his place, babe.”

I smiled. “Thanks, I can take care of myself when I have to.”

“I know you can,” Adam told me as he took one hand off the wheel and reached over to take mine.

We arrived at the diner ten minutes before David was supposed to be there and went inside to order coffee. We were both alternately anticipating and dreading what David might have to say. We were surprised when he walked in to see him flanked by two large men who appeared to be Federal agents. We had known he would be under close watch, but for him to be willing to talk to us directly in front of the officers seemed curious.

David walked up to the table and said, “Mr. Hanson,” and then looking towards me, “Miss Winston, I’m glad you both could make it. I’d like you to meet my colleagues, Agents White and Williams.”

We were confused. “Colleagues?” Adam asked.

“Yes,” David told us as he took out his wallet. He opened it and laid his FBI identification and badge on the table in front of them. There was a picture of him on the ID and it identified him as “Special Agent David Tyler.”

“You’re an agent?” I asked, still unsure what was happening. Adam picked up the wallet and examined it more closely.

David said, “May I?” When we both nodded, he sat down with us at the table. The two other men took a seat in the booth behind us. After the waitress brought David his coffee, he finally continued.

“I’m sure this is confusing to you both. I will try to explain as best I can. I am a Special Agent with the FBI. I have been deep undercover for several years now. My job was originally to find out what was going on with a large influx of money coming both in and out of the President’s campaign fund.

“I was placed as an intern. I was given a background as a Political Science major who was attending law school and had loyalty to the Republican Party. I met Vick and realized that as campaign manager, he was going to be a very important piece of the puzzle.”

I couldn’t help it; my face must have involuntarily shown my disdain regarding the man’s scruples.

David smiled at me and said, “I assure you, Ms. Hanson, I was not using sex to get what I needed from Vick. Vick and I worked closely together for a while. He agreed to help us before anything sexual ever took place between us. We fell in love. Vick was working with me, to expose what was going on with that campaign.

“I admit, it is seriously frowned upon in my line of work to get romantically involved with an informant, and especially if that informant is

of the same sex as you. I have been severely reprimanded for that, and I am sure I haven't heard the last of it." He paused and glanced over at his colleagues.

"Anyways, Vick was already on the inside. It was where I needed to be, but didn't have the time I needed to work my way all the way in."

"Wait," Adam said, "Brigham had proof that Vick was stealing funds himself. I've seen the paper trail."

"That was part of the plan," David said. "Vick needed to look dirty so he could attract the people who were really behind all of this. We set it up to look like he was a playboy and a philanderer. His fiancée Cindy McGuire was paid to play her part. Money was not the draw for her; she loved the drama. His mistress however, the stripper, she did it for the money."

"What about your relationship with Celia Brigham?" I asked. "You used that young girl?"

"Yes, I did," David said with what seemed to me to be little remorse. "After Vick began giving us information, we started figuring out that getting close to Brigham was going to be key for us to infiltrate this political circle. He was in very good standing with the President and all of his close advisors before the oil spill and all of the negative press. We needed to get close to the family so we could get close to him."

“The plan was that we would stage Vick’s arrest, and Miles would push for me to become the President’s campaign manager. Instead, Vick ended up dead and Brigham had discovered our relationship by then. He pushed for Alex Fritz to be put in his place. What Brigham didn’t know, at least from what we’ve discovered, was that Fritz was already deeply involved in what was going on.”

“Now wait,” Adam said. “Alex is and has been a very good friend of mine for some time now. There’s no way he’s involved in any dirty politics.”

David took a long sip of his coffee and said, “I’m afraid he is, Mr. Hanson. Fritz is involved up to his eyeballs.”

“Involved in what, exactly?” I asked. “You aren’t exactly telling us what this is all about. “

I could tell Adam was getting angry. I put my hand on his thigh under the table in a calming touch and waited for David to answer the question.

“Let me back up a bit,” David said. “A few years back when Miles Brigham IV began putting his money in politics, he made a deal with some very powerful people to look the other way, so to speak, about the way he does business. They were willing to do so in exchange for a lot of cash.

“They were willing to do it up until the time that hundreds of barrels of oil were spilled into the Gulf and people all over this country wanted the

billionaire oil mogul to pay for his sins. They wanted him prosecuted and if Miles Brigham IV were to fall, a lot of other people were going to go down with him. The EPA was investigating, the Feds were investigating, and as you both know, the reporters in this city have dug up every piece of dirt on him that they could find. That was when people started getting nervous.

“These were people in high places with powerful positions and six figure monthly incomes. They didn’t want any of the dirt being dug up on Brigham to be connected to them in any way. They started trying to cut ties with him. We believe Vick’s murder was part of that. We have some ideas about who the biggest players were and who may be responsible.”

Adam and I sat silently trying to absorb all of this information. There was one primary question on both of our minds and Adam asked it first,

“Why are you telling us all of this?”

“Well, we believe that your ex-wife’s murder was related, as well. Someone is also afraid of what you know. You’ve been working closely with Brigham and as you said yourself, Alex Fritz is a close friend of yours. We believe that whoever killed Marjorie was actually looking for you that night.”

I didn’t want to think about what may have happened if Adam had gotten home before Marjorie that evening. I pushed that thought to the

furthest reaches of my mind and said, “What about Jack Grant? On the phone, you said he was a part of this, too.”

“Yes, Mr. Grant’s family also has significant monetary ties to the President’s campaign. Vick was the connection early on when the donations were still legitimate. At some point, the money started coming in at such massive rates that we began to get suspicious that the Grants were using these donations to launder dirty money. Interpol has already been investigating them.

“We believe the senior Mr. Grant has ties to a very sophisticated international smuggling ring. A huge part of getting his textile business into the U.S. was to have an outlet for smuggling other items in, as well as another place to hide the illegal monies. The junior Mr. Grant was sent here to make sure that no one found out exactly how much of our money had already been moved into the United States.”

I had been suspicious of Jack’s motives lately and I had seen him arguing with Alex that day not too long ago, but from what I knew, Jack had never been interested in getting involved in his father’s business. It had always been a point of contention between the two. Jack had spent hour upon hour talking it over with me when we had been together. I couldn’t imagine how now, less than four years later Jack had become willing to get his hands dirty.

“So, the Grants sent large amounts of money to the United States under the guise of making political donations and establishing a business here. But it was dirty money?”

“Yes,” David said. “That, we believe was the money that had been disappearing. We made it look like it was Brigham’s money and that Vick was the one taking it, when in actuality we were moving it around.

“Once we had given the money to the campaign, we needed people on the inside to make sure the money didn’t stay in politics, and instead when into business accounts that we could access.

“We couldn’t just approach someone like Vick. He had no criminal history, and there was no reason for them to believe he would be willing to become involved in such a scheme. If we had approached him and he had agreed, we wouldn’t have known if we could trust him. We needed our own man inside. That, I’m afraid, is where Mr. Fritz came in.”

Adam scratched his head, “I still can’t believe that Alex is involved in this. He is my best friend. How could I not know?”

I put my hand on his arm and looked back at David. “What do you want from us?”

David waved over the other two agents. They sat down at the table and the one that David had introduced as Agent Williams took the lead.

“All of what Agent Tyler has told you thus far is so that you will believe what I have to say next. Mr. Hanson, we feel very strongly that your life may be in danger. Through your connection to Mr. Hanson and your connection to Brigham, we are concerned for your safety, too Ms. Winston.

“We are here today to give you a few options. You are free to choose, as I’m sure you both as attorneys know, which option is best for you without any repercussions from us. The issue may be repercussions with regards to your safety.”

Adam raised a skeptical eyebrow. “What are these...options you are offering?”

“The first option is that we put you both into a safe house and remove you completely from the danger.” We both shook our heads in the negative simultaneously and the agent went on. “The second option is that we offer you both incentive to work with us, to help us find out who exactly is responsible for Mr. Field’s and Mrs. Hanson’s deaths and bring this mess to a close.”

We looked questioningly at each other and then I asked, “And the third option is?”

“The third option is that you continue on with your lives and choose not to be any part of this at all.”

I looked at Adam again. I knew him well enough to know what his choice would be. I wasn't one-hundred percent sure myself that it was the choice I wanted to make, but I also knew I would choose Adam no matter what.

"I won't hide, or be hidden," Adam said, dismissing the first choice off-hand. "I need to know for myself, see firsthand what Alex has gotten himself involved in. I also want Marjorie's murderer found. She wasn't much of a wife, but she deserved better than to be murdered naked in her tub, especially if they were there looking for me and she was an innocent bystander."

He looked at me and went on, "I don't want you involved in this, though. These people are dangerous. I want you somewhere safe, until it's over. I couldn't lose you, Alicia."

I sighed. "You know me better than that. I won't accept less than being wherever you are. I won't be hidden and protected while you're out there putting your life at risk. I will do whatever I need to do to catch these people, as well."

Adam started to speak, but was silenced by the look of determination on my face. I was right, he did know me well enough to know I wouldn't accept being whisked away and protected like a fragile princess. I was tough, probably tougher than he was when you got right down to it.

“What about our ongoing cases, though? Adam is lead counsel in Brigham’s civil case. Does he continue with that as if nothing happened? If so, he can’t give you any information that is privileged. He could be disbarred. And what about me, I am defending him in Vick’s murder trial.”

Agent White took that one. “Ms. Winston, you have our word that we will not ask you to do anything which compromises you or Mr. Hanson’s law licenses. We are not interested in whether or not Mr. Brigham wins or loses his civil case. We have what information we need with regards to that.

“As far as Mr. Field’s murder, the police have arrested and charged Mr. Brigham, but we are continuing our own investigation. Mr. Brigham won’t go to trial for quite some time. Perhaps we can have these issues resolved prior to that happening.”

“Do you have any ideas who took the files from our offices?” Adam asked.

“Yes, it was Grant’s men. Grant is the one who gave some of the information to the press, too. He has been meeting with a reporter named Rose Dugan.”

“Figures,” Adam said with a disgusted tone. “I knew she was trouble the first time I met her. What is Grant’s goal here?”

“To get Brigham convicted of murder and locked up, to cause him to lose billions of dollars in the civil case, and ultimately, to ruin him. If

Brigham is so preoccupied with his own problems, he won't have the time or the funds to dedicate to investigating why the money is still disappearing, even though Vick is no longer around to take it. Fritz can explain it away for a while, but we all know that Mr. Brigham's tenacity will drive him to pursue an issue as far as he can."

I looked at my watch and said, "I need to get to the office. I have a meeting with a client at ten. What do you want us to do?"

"In your case, Ms. Winston, we know how close you are to Mr. Grant. We would like you to continue that friendship, and perhaps he will share information with you that we can use." Adam started to object, but I put my hand on his arm to quiet him.

"I can do that, as his friend. I won't go any farther than that, however, do you understand?"

"Absolutely, again, we do not wish to put you in harm's way. We would just appreciate if you could share with us anything Mr. Grant tells you which may be of suspect."

"I can do that," I said and gave Adam a reassuring look.

Adam sighed heavily and said, "And what about me?"

"We need you to find out what you can about Alex Fritz's involvement, if you can."

Before Adam could speak up, I interjected, “He tells you only what Alex chooses to share with him, right? He’s not going to be on a fishing expedition that will make Alex realize he knows something.”

“Same rules apply. We ask only that you share with us what you find out in normal conversation. We are not setting you up to take any type of fall here. You will be watched closely by our undercover agents. You won’t even know we are there, but you will be safe, of that I assure you.”

We got a few remaining details from the agents before we left to head back to Manhattan and the office. We were both quiet on the drive. each lost in our own thoughts.

It was a lot to absorb, and I couldn’t help thinking about the Jack I used to know versus the guy he’d allegedly become. I remembered all the time I had spent listening to Jack talk about wanting to be one of the good guys. He wanted to defend and protect the innocent and had told me over and over that he wouldn’t compromise his values to become part of his father’s business. He had known even then that everything his father did was not on the up and up, and he had told me countless times that he wanted no part of it. I couldn’t help but wonder what leverage his father may have used to convince him otherwise.

PART IV

CHAPTER ONE

ALICIA

We made it back to the office by nine-thirty and each went our separate ways. The woman whose husband was trying to take everything from her due to her infidelity was coming in to meet with me this morning and I needed to prepare. Carla had gotten copies of everything together for me to replace what had been taken in the robbery. I was hoping that the client, Patricia, would still want me as her attorney.

Adam had work to do on the civil case. Thus far, Miles hadn't fired him so he was still making preparations to be in court on Monday morning. He went to meet with Mac to finalize their opening statements.

Patricia Lewis arrived at my office at precisely ten a.m. I welcomed her, and while Carla was getting her a cup of hot tea we made small talk about how the woman had been getting on. Once Carla left I asked her,

“So, Patricia, have you had time to think about what we spoke about on the phone the other day?”

“Whether or not I still want you to represent me?” she asked. “Yes, Alicia, I've thought about it, a lot. Whatever happened here the other night was not your fault. I can't hold it against you. My biggest fear is that the copies of the photos of me and my lover will end up posted online, but I suppose there is just as much chance of that happening because of Nick's anger and need for revenge.”

Patricia was a successful interior decorator. She had established her business prior to her marriage. She and Nick had met five years earlier and from what she had told me, it was love at first sight. They had married and Patricia put her business in Nick's name, as well. She told me it was on the advice of Nick's accountant, for tax purposes. Patricia found out later that Nick had not transferred his computer website building business assets into her name. Everything Nick owned when they were married, and anything

his business had acquired since was in his name alone. He was trying to keep it that way – and take half of what Patricia had worked so hard for.

“I’m so glad you’ve decided to keep me on,” I told her. “I have to tell you again how sorry I am for what happened. I can assure you that we have beefed up our security here. We have security officers on site twenty-four-seven now. I wish we had thought of it before.”

“It’s okay, Alicia,” Patricia told me. “I like you, you’re a real person, and not judgmental of me and what I did to land myself in this position. I appreciate that.”

“I’m glad. As far as judging you, I can see how you were put in a vulnerable position and made a choice that you regretted later. We all do that from time to time. None of us are perfect, and I believe that we can convince a judge of that. You shouldn’t have everything you’ve ever worked for taken from you because of one mistake.”

Patricia told me how she had come to have the affair in the first place. Her and Nick’s whirlwind love affair had soured quickly. According to Patricia, Nick had become neglectful of her and was even verbally and emotionally abusive at times. When she would ask why he rarely touched her, he would tell her that she was fat or stupid. He would often feel bad about it later and bring her flowers or candy to make up, but after a few months of that, the damage was done.

Patricia found her self-esteem to be slipping and she began looking at herself differently than she had before. She felt lonely and unloved. It was a new and uncomfortable feeling for her. It only got worse when Nick began going out of town weekly for trainings on a new computer program that was going to go national soon. He would be gone for days, sometime weeks at a time. He called a lot at first, but then the phone calls dwindled to once a week, and he would act irritable with her if she complained that she was lonely or she missed him.

While he was gone, Patricia had been working for an older woman re-decorating her Fifth Avenue apartment. One afternoon while she was there alone checking color swatches against drapes and carpeting, a man walked through the front door. She said she was alarmed at first, as she hadn't realized that anyone else lived there. The man introduced himself as Cameron, the woman's companion.

Patricia had been a little shocked, seeing as how the woman was at least sixty and this man couldn't have yet been out of his twenties, but she strived to be non-judgmental. Over the course of the next few weeks, Cameron would be there almost every time that Patricia was. They would talk and laugh as she worked.

She found him easy to be with, unlike her relationship with Nick had been lately. He complimented her often. At first it was subtle things like

how nice her smile was or how he liked her hair. She found herself thinking of him often, and finding excuses to go back to the Fifth Avenue apartment for one thing or another just in hopes that he would be there.

One afternoon while they were alone Cameron simply said, "I think about you all the time. I really would like to kiss you; would you mind?"

Patricia didn't allow herself to think about it, she just kissed him. That of course led to more and soon they were making love several times a week, even after she had finished working for Cameron's "companion" and Nick had finished his training and was home for good.

Nick started noticing the changes in her, her newfound confidence and how she exercised more and took better care of her appearance. He didn't ask her about it, though, and Patricia told Alicia if he had, she probably would have just told him the truth straight out.

Instead, he had her followed by a private investigator and weeks later at his attorney's office, he presented her both with divorce papers and pictures of her and Cameron in very compromising positions. He and his attorney had told her she was going to lose everything, and that was when she had come to see me.

On my advice, she had stopped seeing Cameron. Patricia had known it wasn't going anywhere except to the bedroom anyways, but that had been what she needed at the time. I had already had multiple meetings with

Nick's attorney and we deposed most of the witnesses from both sides. The case was ready to be presented to a judge and all that was left to do was prepare Patricia for her testimony. I spent several hours with her talking her through everything and I actually enjoyed it. Her case was simple and normal and compared to the rest of what was going on, refreshing.

Adam and I met up when we had both finished for the day. I told him I was headed home to have dinner with Mother and Father. "I guess I will see you after court in the morning."

"Okay," he said sadly. "I miss you."

I put my hand on his face as we walked out the lobby doors. "I miss you, too. This won't be forever, you know?"

He nodded. "Can we have lunch after court?"

"I'd like that."

He pulled me in for a kiss and when he broke it he said, "We need to set a date."

"A date for..."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Our wedding."

I laughed. "Really? You think planning a wedding less than a week before Christmas while were in the middle of international and political intrigue is the best idea?"

"It beats the hell out of anything else I've got going on right now."

I kissed him softly again and said, “We’ll set a date right after we get through the holidays, okay?”

“Okay,” Adam said, sadly. “I just can’t wait to be married to you.”

“Me, too,” I said with a smile. I also knew my mother well and my wedding would be no small affair.

After another sweet kiss, Adam and I parted ways. I went home to pick up my parents for dinner. I took them to a small eclectic place in the Village. I had resolved on my drive home that although I had agreed to help the FBI, and I meant to do just that, I was going to spend the rest of the holidays enjoying my time with my parents. We talked and laughed as we ate and I didn’t mention work at all. The service at the restaurant was great and the atmosphere fun. I had a sirloin steak that melted in my mouth and my mother and father raved about how good their meals were, as well.

The full moon was out and the night was still young afterwards so we all took a walk in the light snow to a cozy little coffee shop not too far from the restaurant. While we were enjoying our coffee and a dessert pastry, my cell phone rang. It was Adam. I answered with a smile,

“Hi, babe.”

“Hi,” Adam said. “How is your evening going?”

“It’s been really good. My parents and I had a great dinner and now we’re having dessert. How was yours?”

“It was fine, too. I grabbed a bite with Mac and now I’m home relaxing and wishing you were here.”

“Me, too. Soon, baby.”

“Hey, I know we were going to wait until after the holidays to set a date, but I ran into a buddy of mine who does bookings at the Plaza. I mentioned us being engaged and he said it just so happened that he had a cancellation today for Valentine’s Day weekend. Interested?”

“Interested? Are you kidding? I’m ecstatic! Oh, Adam, the Plaza. We could have the wedding in the garden if the weather is good.”

“We can have it on the roof, if you like. I’ll book it and order a sunshine day while I’m at it.”

“I love you,” I told him.

“I love you, too,” Adam said. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight, love.”

I hung up the phone and told my mother what Adam said. She got a thoughtful look on her face and said, “Wow, Valentine’s Day – that’s just over a month and a half away. It might not be easy to pull it off.”

“I know it won’t be,” I told her. “But the Plaza is booked years in advance. This is a golden opportunity. You’ll help me won’t you?” I asked, looking at both of my parents.

Mom and Dad looked at each other and my dad said, “Of course we will, right, dear?”

“Of course,” my mother said. I could tell right away that the excitement set in right away for Lady Winston. She started talking about what we should serve for dinner and who we would invite. She even called her personal assistant back home to have her start making calls to designers for my gown.

I couldn't stop smiling. I was finally going to marry the man of my dreams, and I knew that no matter what, we were going to live happily ever after. My mother could plan it all as long as I walked out of there as Mrs. Adam Hanson.

On Saturday morning at breakfast, Mother was already conferencing on calls with caterers and decorators and bakers. Although I'd known her my entire life I was still impressed with her skills when it came to getting things done.

By the end of the day, her assistant had already found and booked a catering outfit right out of Manhattan. They texted over menu choices and we decided together on a sit-down salmon dinner. The baker was flying in from New Jersey just after New Year's with cake samples, and the best and busiest wedding dress designer in France agreed, after some serious cajoling from Lady Winston, to come out just after New Years to begin

taking measurements and to start the designs for me to choose from for my dress.

By Saturday afternoon, I felt like my head was spinning. It was all happening so fast, but I was happier than I had ever been. My mother was making sure that my wedding would make me feel like a princess, but the ultimate goal was to be Adam's wife. I couldn't wait.

My parents were meeting with old friends at noon for lunch, so Adam and I arranged to meet at Romaletti's. I arrived before him and was seated by the hostess at the table they kept reserved for Adam and his guests. While I was waiting, I noticed a man in a business suit sitting alone at a table not far from mine. Glancing out towards the duck pond, I saw another lone man, that one dressed casually and feeding the ducks. I hadn't given the FBI much thought since yesterday, but couldn't help wondering if these were the men we had been told would be watching to make sure we were safe. I hoped that they were watching Adam as closely if they were. After all, they believed he had been the intended target of Marjorie's murderer and I couldn't help but worry.

Adam walked in just as my cell rang. I looked at it and saw that it was Miles. I wrinkled my nose and told Adam, "It's Brigham."

"Go ahead," he said as he took his seat.

I answered and he said, “Hello, little lady. First off I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other night. I had a few drinks and sometimes tequila makes me act like an ass. I hope I didn’t upset you too much.”

“Apology accepted, thank you. What can I do for you, Mr. Brigham?”

“If you have the time on Monday, I would like to sit and talk with you about my case and also what the press is leaking regarding my son.”

“Absolutely,” I told him. “I have a court date early in the morning, but perhaps we can meet in my office around eleven?”

“I’ll be there, and thank you.” I hung up somewhat amazed at the change in his attitude from our last encounter. I told Adam so and he winked.

“I’ll bet you scared him straight.”

“Oh, yes,” I said with a grin. “I’m sure that was it.”

We both ordered a light lunch, and the chef came out and teased us about not liking his pasta. We both told him we liked it too much and didn’t want to have to roll down the aisle at our upcoming wedding. After lunch, we headed out to the duck pond and sat on a bench tossing them crumbs and talking about what Mother and I had arranged for our wedding so far. Adam was impressed that we’d already gotten so much done.

“Wow, I’ve always heard how long it takes to plan a big wedding. You and your mother are making it look easy.”

I laughed. “My mother makes everything look easy. I’ve never even see her break out in a sweat.”

“Lucky for us England is an ally, then,” he said with a grin. All I could think when I looked at his smile was,

“Lucky me.”

CHAPTER TWO

ADAM

I smiled as I thought of my own mother who was so unlike Alicia’s. I’d told them my parents were dead, but the truth was that my father abandoned us when I was a baby. I have no idea if he’s still alive or not. As if reading my mind Alicia said,

“I wish your parents could be here for our wedding. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, babe. I wish my mother could have met you, though. She would have loved you.” Alicia knew about my father. I just hadn’t thought it was something I wanted to discuss with her parents.

“She must have been a really strong woman.”

I nodded. “She was, I watched her work and sweat my entire life. She never complained, and she was always there when I needed her no matter what. I promised her when I grew up I would be rich and I’d take care of her.”

Alicia looked sad. She knew that my mother had died in her early sixties from lung cancer. “So sad,” she said. “She missed so much of your life.”

I nodded again. “I’d just opened my practice and it was a small and struggling firm at the time. Her death hit me hard. I was angry and confused. She never smoked a day in her life, you know? It didn’t make sense to me.”

Alicia smiled sadly and said, “In a way, she was responsible for your firm’s success, though.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t let it go and it turned into my first class action.” I spoke with people after from the factory where she had worked for over thirty years after her death. The factory made airplane parts, and although my mother had worked her way up to supervisor prior to her death, she had spent at least twenty years working on the floor.

The different types of materials that they used, the plastics and glass and steel plates, were often treated with chemicals to help them keep their shape and withstand heat and cold, etc. I found out that there had been a

large cluster of people from the factory who had died from cancer over the years, specifically lung cancer.

With a lot of investigating, and after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars that I'd had to borrow on experts and other expenses, me and my small team discovered that one of the chemicals the employees were in constant contact with had been banned a few years earlier by the federal government due to its tendency to cause lung cancer with repeated exposure.

The chemical had been in use at the factory for over forty years and the last ten, illegally. During that time, at least twenty-two employees had died of lung cancer. I sued the company in my mother's name and for the families of twelve other victims who joined the suit.

We won a judgment of sixty-four million dollars. The company paid half of that, and then filed bankruptcy and went out of business two years later. My firm had made enough to pay off our loans, and had gained much needed positive publicity.

Hanson and Associates grew into a large and respected firm, and only got bigger and better from there on out. None of that had eased the pain of losing my mother, but I firmly believe that she was still looking out for me and I owed my success to her. Thinking about her had gotten easier over

time when the pain had become less fresh. But at times like these I missed her the most.

“No more sad talk,” I told Alicia. “This is our time.” My mom really would have loved her. She’d begged me not to marry Marjorie, but her warnings fell on deaf ears. In spite of that, she had been a big-hearted woman, and had tried to have a relationship with Marjorie for my sake, but Marjorie looked down her nose at the hard-working woman and only pretended to be nice to her when I was around since she knew I would have never tolerated anything less.

Trying to change the subject and lighten the mood, I said, “I wonder if the FBI agent over there feeding the ducks knows that his fly is open?”

Alicia busted out laughing. “I thought he was probably an agent earlier when I spotted him, but I hadn’t noticed his fly.”

“Well, I must say I’m glad of that,” I said with another chuckle.

We talked for a while longer, and when I walked Alicia to her car, I said, “So, are your parents home or do you think we have time for a quickie?” That made Alicia laugh again. She kissed me and then said,

“Just imagine the look on the Lady Winston’s face if she walked in on that.” We both laughed at the thought and then I said,

“Seriously though, do you think we’ll have some alone time before the New Year?”

“How about this,” Alicia told me, “I’ll buy them tickets for a Broadway show on Monday night and get them a room at the Plaza so they won’t have to make the drive back so late...and then...”

“Alone time,” I said with a smile.

“Alone time,” Alicia agreed, and we sealed the deal with a kiss.

Since I was going to be alone again, I decided I’d call Alex and see if there was anything I could find out. I knew they didn’t want me milking him for information, but whether or not he was involved was nagging at me. I just couldn’t believe it and I was still hoping they would turn out to be wrong about him.

“Hey, buddy,” he said when he answered the call. “What’s up? Are you okay?” All of this drama had made me question everything and I found myself even questioning our years of friendship. I suddenly wondered if this was a bad idea. I’m not the best actor in the world. What if he figured out what I was trying to do? “Adam?”

“I’m here, sorry. I dropped the phone. Alicia’s parents are still in town, and I’m bored. I was wondering if you might have time for a beer.”

“Hell, yes, I have time for a beer. I have been up to my eyeballs in financial documents all day. I need a break. You want to meet at Sports

Center?”

Sports Center was a bar where we used to spend a lot of time hanging out. “Sounds good, about eight?”

“I’ll be there.”

I got to the bar before him and ordered a pitcher of beer and some nachos. I sat there and thought back to when Alex and I first met. We were both undergraduates at Brown University and had been at the same political rally. Alex had taken the stage against the current Democratic government’s latest increase in tuition and fees. I had been impressed with how articulate he was, and how well informed he seemed to be on current affairs. After Alex’s speech, I had gone up to him and told him so.

We began talking and I told him about my plans to start my own law practice after I graduated from law school in a few years. Alex told me he planned to be President of the United States. I had only known the young man for a few hours at that time, but I actually believed it was a good possibility.

Now, there were these federal agents telling me that the bright young man I watched grow from an ambitious college boy to a political powerhouse was nothing more than a mere criminal. I’d heard about how bad it felt to lose your best friend, but I had never experienced that kind of hurt until now. When I saw him come in the door, I told myself to shake it

off or I was going to screw this up. I pasted a smile on my face and as soon as Alex sat down, he grabbed one of my nachos off the plate and popped it in his mouth.

“Help yourself,” I said with a grin.

“I think I will,” he said, taking another one.

“So, tell me how the new post is going,” I asked him while he chewed.

Alex sighed heavily. “It’s good, just tiring. It’s more than a full-time job, being accountable to the President himself.”

“I can imagine,” I told him. “I’m sure you’re accountable to a lot of powerful people these days.”

“You got that right. I have contributors calling me at all hours, wanting to know how every penny of our money is being spent or wanting to tell me how we should be spending it on top of the campaign staff and the Presidential advisors. Sometimes I’m tempted just to turn off the phone and ignore them all.” He took a long drink of his beer and another one of my nachos.

“You should,” I told him, “Give yourself a break, take a vacation, why don’t you?”

Alex laughed, “That’s the dream, buddy. Unfortunately, those powerful people we were talking about me being accountable to wouldn’t allow it.

It's alright, though. I'm making some great political contacts, not to mention an outrageous salary."

I smiled. "I guess that's the silver lining. Have you heard any more about what happened to Vick? The police have arrested Brigham, but I have to tell you, Alicia and I both really don't believe he had anything to do with it."

Alex rubbed his chin, a sign I had come to know over the years that he was trying to think of how to phrase his words wisely. "Vick was stealing from him. Brigham had a lot to lose as long as Vick was in that position."

"I agree. But why kill him? Why not just expose him and move on? Brigham has everything to lose if he is convicted of this."

"True," Alex said. "But Brigham isn't known for his rational thinking when he's angry. He also had just found out about Vick and that David guy. Maybe he just went to talk to him, intimidate him, and the whole mess got out of control."

"Maybe," I said, thinking that Miles' reputation as a hot-head had definitely helped out whoever had set him up if that had been the case. I decided to try something else.

"Alicia has an old friend who's in town on business. His name is Jack Grant; do you know him?"

Alex looked surprised and then said, “Hmm, name sounds familiar but I don’t recall where I’ve heard of him from.”

“Oh, I was just asking because Alicia mentioned that she thought she had seen the two of you talking a few days ago outside of the courthouse. She asked me if you’d mentioned knowing him.”

“Oh yes!” he said suddenly, “That guy with the British accent.” I could actually tell that he was trying to sound as if he’d only just remembered. “He was asking me about some contributions his father was thinking of making to our campaign.”

“Kind of odd, don’t you think,” I asked, “Someone from the UK interested in putting money into our politics?”

“Yes,” Alex agreed, “I thought so, too, at first. It seems that his father is trying to bring his business to the US and I think it’s all about gaining some powerful contacts.”

“I suppose that would be a good way. It seems that the more money you sink into a campaign the more friends you make. Miles Brigham IV is a good example of that.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, Brigham’s recent escapades has made him like poison to be around. All the negative press has caused people in high up places, and people that wish to be in high up places to start cutting ties with him.”

“You were put in your position because of him, right?”

“Yes, that’s true. I’m grateful to him, but I have to look out for myself. If he’s found guilty of Vick’s murder, it might make it look like I’d been involved in that, too, right?”

“I don’t think he’ll be found guilty,” I told him.

“Oh?” Alex asked, “Even though you don’t believe he’s guilty, it sounds like the D.A. is going at him with both barrels.”

“When it does go to court, Alicia will be defending him. He couldn’t do any better than that.”

Alex laughed, “Spoken like a true fiancé.”

The conversation turned to Alicia and I getting married at the Plaza, and we sat and talked for over an hour more. I didn’t come away from it feeling like I’d gotten any more information than I already had. It made me sad to think that my best friend was a crook, and sadder yet to believe he may be tied to not one but two murders. I was dying to ask him just one question when and if this was ever resolved...why?

CHAPTER THREE

ALICIA

I stopped at the grocery store on my way home from lunch and I was happy to see that Adam and I were no longer top news on the tabloids. A young actor had overdosed at his Manhattan apartment the night before. He lived, thankfully, but the newspapers and magazines were speculating on whether or not it had been a suicide attempt. I was glad the young man hadn't died, but I was more than happy to give the front page to him.

When I arrived home, Luis was at the door, as usual. He held the door for me and after asking how my day was going he said,

“You have company,”

“Yes,” I told him. “My parents are still visiting.”

“No, Mr. Grant just got here a few moments ago. I told him you were out, but he said he was here to visit with your parents today.”

“Oh.” He was looking worried that he may have done something wrong. I felt bad and said, “Thank you, Luis. He's an old friend from back home. I'm sure my parents were happy to see him.” He looked relieved to hear that.

As I walked to the elevator in the lobby I noticed a man sitting in the lobby chair that I didn't recognize. Being a New Yorker now, I of course did not know everyone who lived in the building, but I had lived there long enough that I knew how to spot a new face. The man was reading or pretending to read a *New York Times*. I waited a few beats before pushing

the up button on the elevator, and when he felt me looking at him he looked up and gave me an almost imperceptible nod and a smile.

I knew then that he was one of the agents looking out for me, and it made me feel more secure as I got in the elevator and rode up to see what it was Jack wanted this time. I did wonder what story the agent had given Luis, who was also protective. He made a point to not let strangers in unless someone was expecting them. I'm sure if the man did tell Luis he was FBI, he would be discreet about it.

I let myself into the apartment and found my parents and Jack having tea in the sitting room. When Jack saw me come in, he stood up and said, "Alicia, I hope you don't mind me just stopping by. I wanted to get a chance to catch up with your parents while they were still in town."

"No, not at all," I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. Jack gave me a kiss on the cheek and for the first time since I met him all of those years ago, it made my skin crawl a little.

"Jack was just telling us about his father's business coming to the States," my mother said. "Isn't that nice?"

"Yes," I said and then looking at Jack, I asked, "Strange though, you working with him, huh?"

Jack didn't appear nervous at all to me as he said, "Yes, I guess it would seem strange to you, all of those years I spent bad-mouthing him. I was an

angry young man, Alicia. I have since learned to keep my anger in check and appreciate all that my father has done for me, instead of holding a grudge over what I thought he hadn't done."

"Good for you," my father said before I had a chance to ask anything further of him. "Family is our most important asset."

"Here, here," Jack said in a mock toast as he raised his tea cup before drinking from it. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I caught myself before I did. If I let Jack know that I could see through his innocent act he would never share anything with me or in front of me that might lead the FBI to his arrest.

"Alicia," Mother said, "Why don't we have Jack stay for dinner tonight?"

"Sure," I said, really wishing there were some way out of it. "I was planning on making veal cutlets. Is that okay with you, Jack?"

"Sounds terrific, I'd love to stay," he said, enthusiastically.

It was early afternoon, yet but I told them I had to prepare the veal and excused myself into the kitchen. I wasn't good at this whole espionage thing. I knew I'd never get Jack to open up to me if I continued to avoid his company, but I could hardly stomach being around him these days.

I poured myself a cup of tea and although I had an excellent butcher who had already done the work for me, I made a play of tenderizing the

cutlets. After about half an hour, Jack came into the kitchen.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t mind your mother inviting me to dinner?”

“Of course not,” I told him. “I have plenty.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said with a serious look. “It just seems that the last few times we’ve talked, you’ve acted like you’d like to be somewhere else.” I drew on the persona I use when I’m in court and trying to defend a client that I don’t like.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I don’t mean to treat you badly. I’ve just had so much going on lately.”

“It’s okay, as long as I haven’t lost my best friend,” he said, making me sad. I didn’t want to lose my friend, either, but I was almost certain I already had.

“Can I help you with anything?” he asked.

I gave him some vegetables to chop and I began preparing the potatoes I was planning to serve with the veal. As we worked, we talked about old times. I found my chance when Jack brought up a big fight he’d had with his father just before entering law school.

“You remember,” he told me, “I was in such a mood. You made me your famous red velvet cake and we stayed up high on sugar, talking all night long.”

“Yes, I do remember,” I told him. “I think I gained five pounds that night. That leads me to a question I’ve had, though. That night, you swore you’d never have anything to do with your father’s business. What really changed your mind, Jack? I’m not really buying what you were selling my parents in there.”

Jack went dark for a minute, and I thought he wasn’t going to answer. Finally, he said,

“I tried making it on my own. I opened my own practice after you left, and for a while, it felt good defending the innocent. But I wasn’t making any money and ultimately had to go to Father for a loan.

“He gave it to me and then promptly began to use it against me. Anytime he wanted or needed anything from me from then on he’d throw it in my face. He made me feel like a failure and he turned out to be right. I ended up losing the practice and not having the money to pay him back. He offered me a job in exchange for what I owed him and a salary larger than anything I ever would have made as an attorney. It was another failure on my part that I accepted it.”

I felt for him as he talked. I didn’t like seeing him so defeated. I could understand his need to seek out his father’s help, but I still couldn’t grasp why he would be willing to undertake the things the FBI were accusing him of.

“Is your commitment to him long-term or do you plan on returning to the law someday?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“At first, it was only until I could pay him back. Now, I just don’t know. Every day I stay, I get sucked into the business a little deeper.”

“Sucked in” sounded to me like he was almost admitting to getting his hands dirty. He seemed to be sad about it, but almost resigned to his fate.

I was about to ask him another question when my mother came in to see how we were doing. The conversation turned to other things and I was actually relieved. Dinner was actually enjoyable and for a while, I lost myself once again in the good memories of an old friend. When it was time for Jack to leave, I walked him down to the lobby. As he was thanking me for the evening and saying goodnight he said,

“So, I guess you’re really set on marrying this Hanson guy, huh?”

“Yes, Jack,” I said. “I am set on it. I love Adam and can’t wait to be his wife.” I couldn’t interpret the look that passed over Jack’s face, however, the words he spoke next needed no interpretation,

“Just remember what I said before, if it doesn’t work out, for any reason, I’ll be here for you.” I thanked him, but came away with an eerie feeling. If I were a superstitious woman, I would have said that Jack was predicting that Adam and I wouldn’t work out. I knew he was wrong. Adam

was right for me in every way. We just needed to help bring all of this intrigue to a close and get on with our lives together.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADAM

Sunday, I had lunch with Alicia and her parents. It was nice and I think her mother is really warming up to me. The rest of the day I spent going over the lists of prospective jurors for the Brigham case that my investigators had put together for me. I had to be in court at nine a.m. for jury selection. I was trying to face this trial the way I did any other, but so much had happened that I was almost fearful I wouldn't be able to put my best foot forward on this. I was grateful for Mac because even though he knew nothing about what was going on with the FBI, he would keep me grounded.

I got to court half an hour early and so did Mac. We went over our separate lists and spent some time strategizing before the judge called court to order. I started out positive and energetic, but as the day wore on, it was quickly apparent that we had been right to worry about finding an untainted jury in New York.

The prospective jurors who claimed not to have a bias against Miles Brigham IV in general had at the very least been exposed to the constant advertisements that the EPA had been running on television, radio and in magazines, to raise money for what they termed “The Victims” of the oil spill. They advertised that the “victims” were both people and animals, which screwed us further because if the prospective jurors didn’t care about one, they did the other.

That in and of itself was enough to make me concerned that the other side was coming to the table already ahead of us, even though Mac and I had our team working around the clock investigating backgrounds for weeks now. I told the team that I wanted to know if any of them so much as used a recycling bin on a routine basis. I didn’t want an EPA advocate sneaking into the jury pool. That would mean certain death for our case and millions or possibly close to billions of dollars loss to Miles’s company. The process of running background checks on jurors was not exactly legal, but I discovered early on in my career that it could be crucial to winning a case. In this case, it didn’t seem to be helping at all.

Mac and I took turns asking the prospective jurors and we each turned down the first six. We were running out of options and the attorney for the plaintiffs, Hal Rogers, was eating it up. My head was pounding like a drum by the time the judge called it for the day and told us to be back at eight-

thirty a.m. two days after Christmas. All I could think about was that I needed a Tylenol and Alicia. I knew Marie would have something for my headache and tonight Alicia and I would have our much awaited alone time. I couldn't wait.

I had my car service take me back to the office and when I climbed out of the car in front of the office, I saw Alicia's friend Jack. He was opening the passenger door of his black Mercedes. I was surprised when I saw him extend his hand to help Alicia out of the car. She was smiling and so was he, until he looked over and saw me standing next to him. I almost smiled at how quickly his fell off of his face.

"Hi, baby," Alicia said when she saw me there. "It was so warm earlier I decided to walk to court. I guess I wasn't thinking very far ahead. Jack came by and saved me."

"Imagine that, Jack was there...again." I gave him a tight smile and he gave me one in return. He looked at his watch then and back at Alicia and said,

"I just remembered an appointment I have. If I don't see you before, Alicia, have a Merry Christmas."

"Thank you, Jack, you, too." Hmm, he didn't wish me a Merry Christmas, I thought.

“Thank you for giving my fiancée a ride,” I told him with a smile. He shot fire out of his eyes in my direction. He caught himself and quickly hid the look and said,

“It was my pleasure.”

Alicia and I watched as he got into his car and drove away. When he was gone I said, “I don’t think he cares for me much.”

Alicia chuckled. “Me neither, baby.”

I put my hand on the small of her back and steered her in out of the cold. “So he just ‘happened’ to be around again?”

“Yeah, you’re right...that happens way too often.”

“I really wish you would have called me or the car service. I don’t like the idea of you alone in the car with him. I don’t trust that guy.”

“I don’t either, anymore, but not in a sense that I think he would ever hurt me. I can’t even imagine that. Besides, it was a productive ride.” We both dropped it as we rode the elevator with several more people. When we go to our floor, we stepped off and I walked Alicia to her office, stopping by Mary’s desk and asking her for something for my headache. She opened one of her desk drawers and handed me a bottle of Tylenol. I shook three out into my hand and when I handed the pill bottle back to her she handed me a bottle of water to wash them down. I smiled at her and took it. She was a life-saver.

“Thank you, Mary. I’ll be back for my messages in a few.”

Alicia and I continued on to her office and I sat down when we got there and asked her, “What did you find out? Did Jack admit something to you?”

“No, not directly,” she said. “When I got in his car, I started out our conversation by telling him I ran into Alex earlier.”

“Did you really?”

“Yeah, on my walk to the courthouse I ran into him at the coffee shop.”

“What did he say?”

“Alex or Jack?”

She was losing me. My head was throbbing. “Either,” I said.

She grinned. “I’m sorry, babe. I know you’ve had a tough morning. We can do this later...”

“No, later I’m going to be kissing and touching you...and inside of you...”

“Okay,” she actually blushed. She’s so damned cute. “I asked Alex about Jack. He told me about Jack’s dad and the presidential campaign money. Then lo and behold, there was Jack as I came out of court with a warm car and a friendly face. I couldn’t resist at least trying to get a little bit of information.”

“So then did you ask Jack about Alex?”

“Yes and he tried to say he didn’t know him again until I told him that Alex admitted they knew each other. He finally gave in and told me that he was acquainted with him and the last time I asked about him he’d just been confused and hadn’t put the name with the face. Once I told him what Alex said about his father making campaign donations, he acted like he just suddenly remembered and said that his father decided it was the best way to make strong political connections.”

“They’re getting their stories straight,” I said. It pissed me off even more to think Alex was working with Jack. For some reason, I saw Jack as sleazier than Alex, although they were accused of doing the same things. I knew it was jealousy, so I was glad to just have another reason not to like him.

“I asked him about his father and Interpol,” Alicia suddenly said.

“Baby! You’re not supposed to do that. You were alone in the car with him. He could be dangerous if he gets suspicious.”

“I just asked casually. I told him one of my legal contacts in the U.K. had mentioned it and I wondered if it was resolved.”

“So what did he say?”

“He got defensive and told me that with his father’s wealth comes enemies and those enemies would like nothing more than to see him fail. Jack questioned why I was so interested.”

“See why I worry about you?”

She smiled again and waved at me with her palm. “I told him that I was just concerned about him. For years, he adamantly refused to have anything to do with his father’s business and now here he is up to his elbows in it. I also told him that I was confused about him and Alex acting like they don’t know each other when they obviously do.”

The Tylenol was starting to work, but much more of this conversation would bring the headache back with a vengeance, I’m sure. “You should call David and tell him what you found out and then we should both finish up our work and get this day over with so that we can have our night together.”

“I’ve got no argument with that,” she said with a grin.

We left together to head home that evening. We stopped at the Thai restaurant down the street from Alicia’s apartment and picked up dinner on the way home. Luis greeted us at the door and called up the elevator for us. He told Alicia he had seen her parents off for the evening just an hour prior.

When we reached the apartment, I went in to make a fire while Alicia put our food on plates. I pulled off my jacket, tie, and shoes and took a seat

on the floor in front of the sofa facing the fire. Alicia set down the tray with our food and a bottle of wine on it and joined me. I slipped my arm around her and she laid her head into it. We sat there silently for a while, just enjoying our much needed time alone.

I'm not sure how much time passed, but I was the one that finally broke the silence by saying, "I hear your stomach rumbling, did you eat today?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," she said. "But it was early."

"Then let's eat," I said. "Better yet let's have a picnic." I stood up and grabbed the quilt off the back of her couch and spread it out on the floor. Alicia set our plates down on top of it and I poured us each a glass of wine. We ate and talked about wedding plans for the next half hour. When we finished, I helped Alicia carry the plates into the kitchen and told her to go wait for me in the bedroom and I would be right in. Once she was gone, I set up the little surprise I had for her. I carried the tray with several multi-colored bottles of massage oil, a bowl of fresh strawberries and one of whipped cream on top of it.

"Where did you get all of that? I didn't buy strawberries today," Alicia asked, impressed.

"I called Luis while I was making the fire. He had someone run out and get them and then he had them brought up. It was all waiting at the door," I told her with a grin.

“Wow, sneaky. I’m impressed!”

I gave a slight mock bow and then said, “These three bottles are magic potions, guaranteed to cure whatever ails you. If you lie down on the bed on your stomach, I’ll prove it to you.”

She grinned and went over to the bed. She lay down on her belly and by the time I got everything set up she was almost asleep. I saw her pull her eyes open as soon as I touched her with the oil. I picked up one of her feet with my oiled hands and began to massage from her toes down to her heels. She moaned slightly as I used just enough pressure in all the right places, and even massaged her toes one by one.

I put more oil on my hands and started on the backs of her calves. I worked the oil into her skin with alternating soft and just a little bit harder strokes in circular motions.

“Wow, baby, I hadn’t even realized how tired my muscles were. That feels amazing.”

“Good, just relax.” I started on her thighs then, sliding the back of her gown up to her panty line. I gently stroked the insides of her thighs before moving my hands outward. I felt her shudder.

“Are you cold?” I whispered in her ear from behind, making her shudder again.

“No, it just feels so good.”

I finished her thighs and slid her gown up even higher, working on her lower back, and making her moan audibly. When I finished with her back and shoulders, I rolled her over onto her back. I leaned down and kissed her lips and then both of her eyelids and said, “Now my favorite part.”

I slid down on the bed and began working on the tops of her feet and fronts of her calves. Alicia was beginning to squirm. She reached out for me, but I told her, “Let me spoil you first, if you touch me now, I’ll ravage you too quickly.”

She did as I asked and lay still while I rubbed more warm oil on my hands and worked my way up her legs. Before I started on her belly I leaned down and kissed that. She moaned softly and I saw her clench her fists at her sides. I began massaging her again and worked my way up to her chest. I slid the gown up her body until I could slip it gently over her head and then I massaged the outsides of her breasts.

She forgot she wasn’t supposed to touch then. She grabbed the back of my head and led my mouth to one of her nipples. “Please,” she whispered... and the ravaging began.

My mouth and tongue seemed to ignite a fire inside of her that was already raging. She began clawing at the buttons on my shirt while I licked and sucked. Finally, I stood up and took it off myself and stripped off my pants and shorts, too. I lay down next to her and slid an arm underneath her

and rolled her over on top of me. She straddled my waist and leaned down and kissed my face and neck while my hands explored every part of her body.

We kissed and touched and melded our bodies together for what seemed like an eternity until I couldn't take it a second longer. I lifted her up again and turned her on her side. I held up one of her legs and entered her from behind. She let out a cry when I bottomed out inside of her. I pulled back and did it again and again, moving faster each time. When I was on the verge of coming, I pulled out of her and before she had a chance to protest I rolled onto my back and pulled her up on top of me again. I slid her up to my face and sat her sweet pussy down on my lips. She was soaked; she whimpered and squirmed against my face as I worked my tongue in and out of her and licked and sucked on her clit. I brought her to two orgasms before flipping her onto her back, climbing between her legs and taking what I'd been craving for days.

She thrust up her hips as I thrust mine down and plunged my throbbing, aching cock into her over and over again. I felt the walls of her pussy spasm in her third orgasm of the night and when she clamped down around me like a vice, I went head-first off the bridge I'd been standing on the edge of. The orgasm was massive and it shook every part of my body. When I could speak again I whispered,

“I love you so much,” in a hoarse and raspy voice.

“I love you more,” she said with a giggle. I grabbed her and tickled her until she admitted she was wrong. That night neither of us slept more than an hour or two. We experimented with every different position we could think of and when I had to drag my tired butt out of her bed so that I could be out of there before the Lord and Lady returned, I didn’t even complain. Much.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALICIA

“Don’t you Americans take any time off for the holidays? Today is the day before Christmas Eve. You would think the courts would be closed.” I laughed at the way my mother had referred to me as one of the “Americans.”

“The courts will be closed tomorrow, Mother, from Christmas Eve day until the day after New Year’s. Until then, it’s business as usual.”

Lady Winston shook her head disapprovingly. “This is why there are so many unhealthy Americans,” she said. “All work and no time to take care of themselves. It gets you an early grave. I certainly hope you and Adam

will remember that. You both work too much. You need time for your health, both physical and mental.”

“Yes, Mother, you’re right. I promise we will do our best to remember it. I plan to have a long, healthy life with the love of my life.”

“And give me plenty of healthy grandchildren, I hope?”

I laughed and said, “Slow down, Mother. We’re not even married yet. We’d like to get comfortable living with each other before we start adding ‘plenty’ of children to the mix.”

The truth was that Adam and I had not even talked about having children. I would like one or two someday, but I have no idea how he feels about that. He and Marjorie didn’t have any kids and he is forty years old... maybe it’s something I should talk to him about before we get married.

“Well, of course you should give it some time,” Mother said. “But not too much.”

I kissed her on the cheek and stole a piece of the cookie dough she was rolling. “Not too much,” I agreed. “I have a meeting and a court date. I won’t be late today. We also have the company Christmas party tomorrow night.”

My mother nodded. “I’ll need to go shopping for something to wear.” That was when my dad looked up from the table where he was sitting quietly reading this whole time.

“Why on earth did I pay so much for luggage on the airplane if you’re going to buy a whole new wardrobe while we’re here?”

Mother rolled her eyes. “Don’t you want to be proud to have me on your arm?”

“I’d be proud to have you on my arm naked,” he said.

“Of course you would be. I look fantastic naked.”

“Oh my goodness, that’s my cue to leave,” I told them. I heard them both still laughing as I went out the door.

I went to the office before the courthouse to meet with Miles. As soon as I stepped off the elevator I saw him standing near Carla’s desk. I wasn’t close enough to hear what they were saying, but I knew Carla well enough to judge by the look on her face that she was actually impressed by the man. As I got closer, Miles looked up and spotted me.

“Well, hey there, little lady. I was just getting to know your very pleasant assistant here.” I glanced at Carla and was surprised to see that she was actually blushing. I knew Miles’s history of mating and dating beautiful young women, but I couldn’t for the life of me see what was attracting them. With the other women I might possibly say money, but I also knew Carla well enough to know with her that wouldn’t be the case for her. I made a mental note to ask her about it later as I greeted Miles.

“Good morning, Mr. Brigham. Thank you for agreeing to come in so early at the last minute. They changed my court time on me today.”

“Not a problem at all. Had I known Carla was so interesting to talk with, I would have come by even earlier.” I had to physically clench to keep from rolling my eyes.

I smiled instead and said, “Please, come into my office.”

Miles followed me through the office door, winking at Carla as he did. I closed the door behind us and saw Carla’s face flood with color once more. Resisting the head shake, I said, “Please have a seat, Mr. Brigham. Can I offer you something to drink?”

Miles sat in a comfortable leather armchair facing my desk and said, “No, thank you, and please, call me Miles.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll try to remember, Miles.” I sat down in my chair facing across the desk toward him as he said,

“So, how dire is this situation I’m in?”

“Well, I can’t really get into details, but I can tell you that I know for a fact that the FBI is exploring other possibilities with regards to Vick’s murder. The NYPD and District Attorney’s office are unfortunately still doing their best to build a case against you however circumstantial it may be.”

Miles scratched his chin and said, “That damn midget DA Dawson has it in for me. I’m not sure what I ever did to him, but I suppose that small bit of good news is better than none. You do know I didn’t do this, right? I admit that I’ve been involved in a few slimy deals in my time, but murder has never been one of them.”

“Yes, Miles, I am sure you are not a murderer. I can promise you that I will do my absolute best to prove that if and when this goes to trial. Just keep in mind, though, as the trial draws nearer that all we really need is to give the jurors any reason to doubt you did this. The State has the burden of proof on them, and I don’t believe that they have enough to convince twelve people you did this.”

“I do thank you for your vote of confidence. I’ve been defended plenty by lawyers who knew I was guilty as charged. In this case, though, it’s real important to me that people know I am not a cold-blooded killer. Speaking of, how about these allegations against my son? Do you think they’ll go anywhere?”

“At this point, it’s all hearsay. I don’t think the D.A. will pursue it unless we actually have an eyewitness step forward. Dawson loves to win and he hates to lose. He doesn’t often throw his hat in unless he believes it’s a sure bet.”

Miles nodded. “Okay, then. If they did arrest him, would you still be willing to defend him?”

“Yes, of course. I agreed to be your family lawyer. Nothing has changed. As for your trial, you do have the right to a speedy trial if you should wish. I would recommend against it, but the choice is yours.”

“I would definitely prefer to wait until this civil suit is over and done with. I don’t know if my old ticker could take the stress of two trials at once. Hell, just the jury selection process was giving me chest pains yesterday.”

I laughed and said, “I doubt that, Mr. Brigham...I mean Miles. If your ticker is as strong as everything else I know about you, you’re bound to outlive us all, stress or no stress.”

Miles smiled as he stood up and extended his right hand. “Thank you again, little lady. I have to get back to the damn courthouse. I feel better about all of this knowing it is in your capable hands.”

Miles made it as far as the door before turning around and saying, “You mind if I ask a personal question?”

I wasn’t sure I liked that idea, but said, “No, go right ahead,”

“I was wondering if it would be a problem for you if I were to ask your pretty little assistant out on a date.”

“Mr. Brigham, you are a piece of work.” He shrugged and smiled and I went on, “Carla is a single free adult and welcome to date whom she chooses, so go for it.”

He winked at me and closed the door behind him as he left. I could only shake my head. I had most definitely never met anyone like him before. I looked at the clock then and decided I better head over to the courthouse. Traffic would suck today with last minute shoppers out and about and I wasn't going to walk today – it was freezing outside.

I got to court in time to greet Pamela just before the judge called it to order. We'd gone over everything yesterday and the judge had taken the night to deliberate. He asked now if anyone had anything else to say before he pronounced judgment. Both parties declined and the judge went on,

“I have carefully reviewed the assets of both parties both before and after the marriage state. I have also carefully reviewed the pre-nuptial agreement signed by both parties prior to their marriage. With both of these things in mind, I have then taken into consideration the statements made to this court with regards to the situation leading up to this divorce.

“I am not one that often declares a legal contract null and void. In this case, however, I am finding that if the prenuptial agreement were to be upheld Mrs. Lewis would be excuse my language here please, sorely screwed. She was the one who established and built her business. From all I

have read and heard here, she was the one that made it the success it is today. I will uphold the part of the prenuptial that regards alimony only.

“Mrs. Lewis, you are not granted alimony nor are you to be granted any of Mr. Lewis’ assets. However, your business is yours, as well as the assets that come with it. As far as the apartment is concerned, I grant you both fifty-fifty interest in it. I would strongly urge you both to put it on the market, split the proceeds, and move on with your lives.”

The judge slammed his gavel once and pronounced court to be dismissed.

Patricia was ecstatic. She hugged me and over her shoulder I saw the look of astonishment on Nick’s face. He had truly believed he would win. I was happy for Patricia. It was a good thing that she was rid of this arrogant, entitled man.

CHAPTER SIX

ADAM

I forced myself to leave the work on my desk and go home early on Christmas Eve. I still had shopping to do. I drove to the mall before going home. I was anything but a procrastinator in my professional life, but when it came to Christmas shopping, I took first prize in the procrastination

department. I couldn't recall ever shopping before Christmas Eve, and had even begun to tell myself that it was a tradition now. I had already given Alicia the engagement ring I bought, of course, but wanted to have something to give her on Christmas day, as well.

I didn't go in with a definite idea of what to get her. I window shopped by the clothing stores knowing that I wasn't going to even try to match her style. Alicia had a way of making casual Friday clothes look elegant. I was going to just leave that to the expert. I found a small store that offered engraved items, and after looking at everything, I settled on a platinum ink pen. I had it engraved with the words, "I love you the most. Adam." I smiled, thinking that it would irritate her a little that I had managed to get in the last word. Part of the reason most attorneys are good at our jobs is that we love to win an argument.

Next, I stopped at the jewelry store where I bought her ring. The owner was behind the counter today and greeted me warmly. I told her what I was looking for and she went to the back and came out with a square red box. I opened it and inside set against red velvet background was a beautiful bracelet. It was made of chocolate diamonds and very, very small rubies. The black of the diamonds contrasted beautifully with the deep red of the rubies. It was perfect. I told her I would take it and as she was wrapping it

up I remembered Alicia's parents. What the heck do you get a Lord and Lady for Christmas?

I wandered aimlessly through a few more stores and then finally stopped to get a cup of coffee and call Alicia. She laughed when I told her what I was doing,

“You do realize that it's Christmas Eve?” she asked with a giggle.

“Of course,” I said. “That's why I'm shopping.”

“Well, had you done your shopping earlier, like the rest of us, you could be here enjoying cookies warm out of the oven right now. Mother has been baking all day.”

I wished I were there. I looked around me at all of the last-minute shoppers as desperate as I was to find just the right thing. “I needed to ask you what does one buy a Lord and Lady for Christmas.”

Alicia laughed again, and then said, “Aw, that's sweet, powerful attorney and CEO of his own firm, at the mall on Christmas Eve worrying what to buy the future in-laws.”

“I'm glad you are amused,” I said sarcastically but with a genuine smile. “Can you help me out, or not?”

“Hmm,” she said thoughtfully. “How about tickets for another Broadway show? They loved the one they saw last night.”

“How long will they be in town?” I asked. I hated to wish them away for Alicia’s sake, but somewhat selfishly I was hoping it would be soon.

“They will be here for another week,” she said.

“Okay, then, show tickets it shall be. Thank you, I love you,” I told her.

“I love you more,” she said before ending the call.

Once I finally finished the shopping, I checked in with Marie to make sure all was well with the plans for the party later that night. She told me that everything was right on schedule. I decided that since I had a few hours before I needed to get ready, I would drive over to Alex’s house and surprise him with the gift he I picked up for him. As an attorney, I was sure there was too much evidence against Alex at this point for him to be innocent. As a best friend, I still wanted to hope.

Alex lived in a home in an upper class neighborhood out on Long Island. When I drove into the driveway, I noticed a large black sedan parked in front. I thought to myself that maybe I should have called first, but I was here now so I figured what the hell. I grabbed the envelope with the Super Bowl tickets I had bought Alex for Christmas. The New York Giants were a sure thing this year, and I knew they were his favorite team.

I walked up to the front door and was about to ring the bell when I became aware of raised voices inside. Looking through the small glass window on the front door I could make out Alex and the back of another

man standing at the edge of the living room. Alex looked angry. I stepped to the side of the glass and put my ear to the door. Alex was yelling,

“This was supposed to have gone away by now! You were supposed to have made it look like Brigham was responsible for Vick’s death. You screwed it all up from the start. No one was supposed to get hurt. You were just supposed to shut Vick up and make sure that old blow-hard, Brigham was ruined in the press by this oil spill.”

“Obviously, I did a fine job of setting up Brigham,” the other man said, “Or they wouldn’t have arrested him.”

“I heard the tape. Alicia told him that the FBI is looking at other suspects. What if that’s true? I don’t want the FBI sniffing around here. Do you understand? If they start looking into where the campaign funds are coming from and going, I may as well have committed political suicide. Not to mention the jail time because they’ll think I had something to do with Vick Landon’s and Marjorie’s murders.”

When the other man spoke again, I recognized his voice, or rather his accent. It was Jack Grant. “You just need to calm down. Alicia doesn’t know anything. She was trying to make her client feel more at ease, that’s all. That’s how she does things. She’s a decent person with a big heart. As for you being held responsible, well...I’d have to guess you’re right on

target there. That being said, I wouldn't go shooting my mouth off to anyone."

"Are you kidding?" Alex said sarcastically. "Who am I going to tell? The police? My best friend whose ex-wife was murdered by people working for me? Don't worry, Grant, my lips are sealed. You just better clean this mess up in a hurry. Where are you with finding Vick's boyfriend? That's another loose cannon there."

Grant had lowered his voice at that point and I couldn't hear his reply. I had heard enough, however. I got back in my car and sped out of Alex's driveway and down the street as quickly as I could. As far as I could tell, neither Alex nor Jack had realized I was there. I drove a few blocks and then stopped my car in front of a plush home with about an acre of lush green lawn stretching out towards the sidewalk. I took out my phone and punched in David's number.

"Agent Tyler," I began after David answered. "I have some information for you. It's urgent that I meet with you today. Can you come to my office?" David agreed to meet me there in an hour. I asked him to bring someone who could sweep for bugs, as well. David agreed readily and didn't ask any questions.

The office was dark and quiet when I got there. Mac and I had given the staff and associates off until the day after New Year's. I unlocked the door,

disabled the alarm, and headed to my office. Once there, I called the security company and told them not to worry that I was meeting with a client and would alert them once we were finished. As I sat and waited for David I fumed inside. I was furious with Alex for involving himself in dirty politics. I was furious that Grant who was involved in at least two murders continued to present himself to Alicia as a friend, and most of all, I was furious that he had been listening in on Alicia's private conversations. Thank God I hadn't spoken to her about her suspicions about Jack while in her office. Thank God I hadn't spoken to the FBI while they were listening.

David called and said he was pulling up in front of the building. I went down and let him and his associates in. He had two crime scene technicians with him. They were prepared to sweep the entire office building for bugs. David motioned to me with his hand not to speak until they were done.

It took the technicians about twenty minutes to find two listening devices. One was in Alicia's office, inside the frame of the picture of her and I that had been tampered with the night of the break-in. It was a very small, flat device and would never have been noticed had we not been looking for it. The other one they found in my main conference room. David said he was surprised it had been put there rather than in my office, but I wasn't. Alex, being my best friend and confidante, knew that most of my important business was conducted in the conference room. My office

was mainly for entertaining important clients during which time not much important business was discussed. After they had removed and disabled the devices, I filled David in on what I had heard at Alex's home.

"So, Fritz said that Grant was supposed to shut Vick up, but not hurt anyone. I wonder how that led to your ex-wife's murder."

"I wondered about that, too," I said, "I still don't believe that Alex would have tried to have me harmed in any way. Maybe Grant has gone renegade on him."

"Maybe," David said. "Tell me again what we said about me?" I repeated what I heard Alex say to Jack about him being a "loose cannon".

"This we can use," David said. "Did he say who they were using in the press to smear Brigham?"

"No," Adam told him, "But my best guess would be Rose Dugan. She has published the worst of the reports on Brigham with regards to the oil spill and his personal life."

David nodded slowly, "Okay, I'll work with that,"

"What about the bugs? Won't they know we found them?"

"Absolutely," David said. "But they don't have to know that you know who planted them. The break-in is as of yet unsolved to our knowledge, correct?"

"Yes, that's true. So in the meantime, what do you want me to do?"

“Nothing, go and have a Merry Christmas with your friends and family. Just remember to act as if things are all okay when you see your friend Fritz.”

“That’s going to take an academy award winning performance,” I told him, “I really want to punch the son of a bitch in the mouth.”

“In good time, friend,” David told me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALICIA

Mother and I both got new gowns for the Christmas Eve party. Mother insisted on paying for mine even though I told her more than once that I could afford to buy my own clothes now.

“Nonsense, it’ll just be an additional Christmas gift from me and your father,”

I ultimately gave in and since it was a Christmas present, I didn’t even look at the price tag. My mother’s gown was an elegant gold satin ankle-length and mine was a white, off the shoulder floor-length gown with very fine red and gold piping around the neckline and one sleeve. We had spent more time shopping than we had planned, so we had to hurry home and get

ready. Adam was picking us all up at six p.m. and it was already almost four-thirty.

Luis helped us up to the apartment with our packages and Lady Winston slipped him something and said, “Thank you, Luis. Merry Christmas to you and your family.” Luis thanked her and wished all of us the same. As he was getting back on the elevator I saw him glance at what my mother had placed in his hand. He looked ready to protest, but I shook my head slightly to let him know that arguing with my mother was a lost cause. He smiled broadly then and just as the doors slid shut, he placed a hand over his heart and gave a small bow.

I looked at Mother as we entered the apartment. She had done a good thing for Luis and his family but gave no indication that I even realized it as she breezed into the entryway calling for my father to bring in the rest of our things. I smiled. I only recently started to notice things about my parents as adults that I hadn’t before. One thing was the fact that no matter how haughty and harsh my mother liked to pretend she was, she was just an old softy at heart.

I was ready for the party by the time Adam rang the bell at six. I opened the door and he took a sharp intake of breath when he saw me. “Oh my God,” he said, finally. “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

I smiled. “Thank you. You are quite a vision yourself.”

Adam was wearing a black Armani suit with satin lapels and a green silk tie. His tie clip and cuff-links were gold and studded with small diamonds. He wore a black silk shirt under his suit, and it looked so soft that I couldn't resist the impulse to touch it softly with my fingers.

“Wanna rip it off?” he said with a grin.

“Absolutely,” I whispered as I stood on my tiptoes to give him a kiss. Even in three-inch heels, he towered over me.

My father was waiting for us when we went into the sitting room. He looked quite dashing himself in a black suit and bow tie with a crisp white shirt underneath. We sat and waited for Lady Winston then. Alicia's father said,

“I can't remember a time before I sat around waiting for this woman,”

“But it's always worth the wait, isn't it?” My mother's voice floated into the room before she did. Adam stood up, and taking her hand he bowed slightly at the waist to brush his lips to it, “You look stunning, my lady,” he told her.

I almost laughed out loud when Mother blushed like a school girl and thanked him. “Are we ready?”

We agreed that we were and we all got our coats and headed out to the car.

When we arrived at the large conference center, I was once again in awe of what Marie could accomplish. The decorations were Christmas themed, but subtle and elegant. The buffet table was layered with foods that both looked delicious and exuded a mouth-watering aroma. There was a very large Christmas tree, dressed up with red and white satin bows and ribbon, with a delicate silver star adorning the top. Marie had somehow managed to buy gifts, as well, and they all looked professionally wrapped and covered the floor beneath the tree. Adam and I sat our gifts underneath the tree before taking our place at the large table in front of the room.

Our table had been reserved for senior and junior partners and our guests. I was thrilled to see Kyla. We hadn't had much chance to spend time together lately due to both of our busy schedules. I introduced Kyla to my parents, and after we were seated, Kyla whispered,

“Your mother is beautiful. I see why you're so pretty now. And your father, he's quite the silver fox himself.”

I laughed and said, “You really need a date.”

“Shows how much you know,” Kyla said. “I happen to have a date, and here he comes now.”

I thought that I was seeing things when I looked up and Jack was approaching our table.

“Hi,” he said, taking the seat next to Kyla,

“Hi,” I said back, “You’re Kyla’s date?”

“You needn’t sound so surprised,” Jack told her. “Kyla and I met at the courthouse one day. We had lunch, and have gone out a few times since. I just found out today when she asked me to come to this dinner tonight that you and she were good friends.”

“Yes,” Kyla said in a hushed tone so that the others at the table couldn’t overhear. “I really didn’t know the two of you had a history. If this is weird for you....”

“No, no, of course not,” I said, “I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Kyla smiled, she looked happy that I wasn’t upset with her. I felt bad. I would have to tell Kyla that Jack was involved in some shady business. I couldn’t risk her getting hurt. I would wait until after the holidays, though, so as not to ruin them for her. I saw the look on Adam’s face when he noticed Jack at our table. He motioned his head at me and stood up. I stood up as well, and Adam excused us both. I followed him to a small alcove that led to the restrooms.

“What is he doing here?” Adam asked.

“He’s Kyla’s date,” I said with a pained expression.

“Oh Jeez, that’s just what Kyla needs! I hadn’t had time to tell you yet about my afternoon. I suppose now it’s imperative that I do.”

Adam told me about going to Alex's and the conversation he had eavesdropped on between Alex and Jack. He also told me about meeting with David and discovering the bugs in the office.

I was appalled. "Jack was in on the murders? I knew he was into some risky business, but I never would have imagined...murder? Oh my gosh, Adam, we have to warn Kyla."

"I know," he said. "Let's wait until tomorrow, though. She's here with all of us tonight so we know she's safe. Kyla has no stake in anything that has been going on. Jack would have no motive for wanting to harm her."

"Okay," I agreed. "But if she tries to leave with him, I don't know if I can sit back and just watch it happen."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?" I nodded and he kissed my forehead softly. "Let's go eat, drink, and make merry for now. I'm postponing the espionage until after the holidays. Care to join me?"

"Alright, 007," I teased, "We'll resume the spy vs. spy routine later. Let's go get a plate before all of the lobster is gone, it looks delicious." Adam smiled and put his arm around her waist, "I'll never figure out how you eat like you do and keep looking so hot."

"Good genes," I said. "Look at mother."

Dinner was excellent. After it was over, Mac and Adam took the small stage and microphone at the center of the room. We thanked all of our employees for coming, and for all of their hard work and dedication over the past year. Envelopes were handed out one by one then, with bonus checks inside for all.

When they finished, the gift exchange took place, and then the live band started playing music for dancing. Adam and I danced to a slow song, and as we swayed slowly to the beat, the party and the rest of the room disappeared for a while. We both knew this was right, and couldn't wait for the day when we were husband and wife.

While we were taking a break from dancing, I noticed Jack and Kyla on the floor. She looked radiant in her red dress with the plunging neckline and her dark, blonde hair pulled up high and small curls falling down around her face. I felt another pang of sadness that I would have to dash my friend's hopes about this man.

I looked around the rest of the dance floor. My parents were dancing together, holding each other and in perfect step. I hoped that mine and Adam's marriage was still that strong after so many years. I saw Adam's partner Mac and his wife dancing. They looked happy, as well. Christmas was a magical time of year, no doubt about it. It had a way of erasing all of the bad things that had happened the year prior, if only for a little while.

I looked back at Adam and noticed him watching Jack and Kyla. He looked as if he could hardly control his emotions. I knew that he was thinking of Marjorie and what Jack had done or had arranged to be done to her. I reached out and put my hand on his arm. He slid it around me and pulled me in close to his side.

“When this is all over, I’m going to punch that SOB in the mouth,” he whispered in my ear.

“Me, too,” I agreed, making him laugh.

The evening was a big hit with everyone. I put my parents into a car around midnight and they headed back to the apartment. Adam and I stayed until two am, when the party finally started breaking up. As I hugged Kyla and said goodnight, I couldn’t help it I said,

“You’re not taking him home with you, right?”

Kyla looked at me with a raised eyebrow and said, “What kind of loose woman do you think I am? We’ve barely started dating. There will be no sex for a few more weeks.”

I smiled. God, I loved this woman. “Be safe,” I whispered to my friend. “We’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

I was having a brunch at the apartment for my family and close friends. “Of course, see you then. Merry Christmas, friend.”

“Merry Christmas, Kyla, I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Kyla told me before taking Jack by the arm. Jack wished me and Adam both a Merry Christmas and as they walked towards the exit, I wanted so badly to yell “stop” and make him leave Kyla there with us. I glanced at Adam’s face, and realized that he was having a hard time not acting on the same impulse.

“Let’s get you home,” Adam said, taking me by the hand. “Santa Claus will be here soon.”

I giggled, “You mean Father Christmas?” I said, referring to the jolly man who visited me on Christmas as a child.

“Before we get married, you’ll have to sign over rights to teaching our children the proper names for things here in America. Your English is not so good.”

He said our children. I felt a warm glow flood my veins. I laughed then and said, “My English is perfect, just not mixed with grammar and made-up sayings like yours.”

I slept amazingly well that night. I dreamed of being married to Adam, living in a big house in the suburbs. In my dream, we had three children. Two of them were boys and had their father’s dark hair and handsome smile. The youngest was a little girl with her mother’s auburn hair and

dimples. We were barbecuing as a family in the dream, and were all just about to jump into the large blue swimming pool when I woke up. I wasn't sure what had woken me at first, but then I took a deep breath and the smell of my father's famous Belgian waffles reached my nose. I could also smell fresh brewed coffee. I reached for my robe and slipped on my fuzzy slippers and went out to join him.

I found him in the sitting room before a roaring fire with a platter of waffles, butter and maple syrup, and a carafe of the wonderful smelling coffee. "Good morning, and Merry Christmas, sweetheart. Sit down and I'll pour you a cup of coffee."

"Good morning, Daddy, and Merry Christmas to you," I said, giving him a kiss on his cheek before sitting down. He poured me a cup of the steaming coffee from the carafe and after I took a long, very satisfying sip I said,

"It's been so good having you and Mother here for the holidays. I'm going to miss you so much when you leave next week."

My father took my hand in his. "I'll miss you, too. I'm glad we came. It was not only good to see you and meet Adam, but to see how well you've done for yourself makes us so proud. It sets our minds at ease that you are okay way over here by yourself."

"Aw, Daddy, I'm not by myself. Adam is always close by."

“Until I met him, I couldn’t be sure...”

“Are you sure now?”

“Yes, I think you’ve made a good choice there for a husband. I will still reserve the right to worry, though. I am after all your father. That never changes no matter how old you get, how successful you are, or how many husbands you have.”

I smiled and laid my head on my father’s shoulder. “You know no matter how many husbands I have and for the record, I only plan on having the one, you will always be my first love.”

My father kissed my head and we sat there like that in silence for a bit. Mother came in a while later, and the silence was broken. “Let’s give her our gift now before everyone gets here,” Mother told my father.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Adam?” he asked.

Mother had always been the one to give out gifts early and not keep secrets until Christmas morning. I imagined the wait for today had been especially hard on her being that we had been living together for the past couple of weeks.

“He’ll be here soon enough and Alicia can tell him all about it. Besides, if she doesn’t like it, then it will be easier to exchange if Adam hasn’t yet seen it.”

Daddy laughed. “You just can’t stand the waiting, that’s all,” he said to my mother. She nodded in agreement.

“Yes, that’s true. We’ve already been waiting for some time. Let’s give it to her now.”

My father got up and went over to the tree. He rummaged around for a moment and came back with a white and gold envelope. He handed it to me and said, “Promise me before you open it that if you don’t like the gift, the idea of the gift, or think we’re being intrusive you’ll tell me.”

“I promise,” I told him. I had no clue what it could be. I took the envelope and slid the sealed portion open with my finger. As I pulled open the envelope a document came into view. It said “Deed of Trust” across the top, and listed both mine and Adam’s names under heading “owner/s”.

“Oh, my,” was all I could manage to get out when I realized what it was, “This is way too much, we can’t accept this,” I said to my parents.

“Don’t be silly,” Mother said. “Of course you can accept it. It’s what parents do and it made us very happy to do it. Look it over and take Adam out to look at it and if it is not what you both want, we will make other arrangements.”

I was holding in my hand a deed of trust to a home and the five acres that surrounded it. I couldn’t believe my parents had done this. There was a picture of the house in the envelope. I looked at it once and then again. It

was almost identical to the home I had dreamt Adam and I lived in with our children. I got up and threw my arms around my mother first, almost knocking her over. She hugged me back tighter than she usually did. I let go of her at last and hugged my father.

“I don’t even know what to say, thank you.”

“Take Adam out to look at it. If it’s not perfect for you both, let us know, we mean it. Your home has to be special to you. It’s another part of a good marriage, stability.”

“I will,” I said with tears of happiness in my eyes. I couldn’t wait to tell Adam. I knew he would be as happy as I was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADAM

Christmas came and went in the blink of an eye. I was at the office the day after Christmas and still in a mild state of shock over what Alicia’s parents had done for us. I tried to tell them both that it was too much, but they insist that it’s ours and they won’t take it back. It looks perfect in the photo we have of it, but I couldn’t wait to see it in person. Alicia and I were driving up tomorrow afternoon while her parents spent the afternoon with some friends at their club.

Today, I was stuck in meetings all day. The first one found me and Mac locked up in his office with Kyla, Nico and three paralegals. We were drawing up motions for the civil trial and making sure that we'd collected copies of everything we could to replace what was taken in the robbery. I felt like I was seeing double by the time we broke for lunch at noon, but I was in the middle of a brief and I didn't want to stop. I told the rest of them to go on and I'd step out and get a sandwich or something later. Knowing me the way that she does, Marie didn't wait for me to go out and get my own lunch. She appeared at the edge of my desk with a sandwich and chips and a cup of coffee. She sat them down in front of me and I said,

“Thank you, Marie. I have no idea what I would do without you.”

“Sir, I'm not sure you could do it without me,” she said with a wink.

“I think you're right, Marie,” I agreed as I took a sip of my coffee. I sat it down and once again said, “I think you're right.”

“Miss Winston came in a little bit ago. She's in her office. She asked me not to disturb you, but if you took a break she'd like to see you.”

“Thank you, Marie.”

“You're welcome, sir, and don't forget, you really would never survive without me.”

I laughed. “I know I wouldn't.”

After Marie left, I ate my sandwich and finished my coffee, all the while reading the files in front of me. I went into the executive washroom and brushed my teeth before heading down the hall to find Alicia. Carla was still on vacation for the holidays so there was no one at her desk. I tapped softly on Alicia's door before hearing, "Come in."

"Hey," she said, standing up from behind her desk,

"Hey, yourself, I thought you were taking the day off?"

"I tried," Alicia said with a tired smile. "Jack showed up and ruined my mood."

"What?" I said, suddenly alarmed, "While you were alone? What did he want?"

She went around the desk and put her hand on his arm. "I'm okay, you can calm down. Let's sit and I'll tell you about it." We went over and sat on the sofa and she said, "First of all, please don't be mad but I talked to Kyla last night about Jack. I didn't tell her why, but I told her he wasn't the right man for her. She trusts me and because of that, she told him she didn't want to keep seeing him."

"I'm not mad," I told her honestly. I actually prefer Kyla know something if it kept her away from him. "He's pissed?"

"Yeah."

“He came to the door this morning when my parents’ were out and when I opened it, he pushed his way in. He asked if I said something to Kyla about him. I was caught off-guard because I knew Kyla would never tell him anything I said. I played dumb and he said she just abruptly broke things off and he suspected it was because I said something. He scared me, not because of anything he said or did; it was the way he was looking at me. I told him to leave and he finally did. The FBI agent from downstairs checked in on me and I told him I was fine and he said he’d watch out for him and not let him up again.”

“I want to punch the S.O.B. in the mouth.” My fists were clenching on their own. If he’d been there right then, I don’t think I could have controlled myself.

“Me, too,” she smiled and went on, “But we can’t so I say we put our energy to better use.”

My cock twitched in my pants and I smiled and said, “What did you have in mind?”

She looked at her new watch and said, “That all depends on how much time you have, and how you feel about this couch.”

I jumped up and almost ran to lock the door. I came back and took her into my arms, kissing her full on the mouth and massaging the small of her back with my fingertips. She responded with a moan that only egged me on.

In one swift motion I had her blouse unbuttoned and the snap that held her bra released. I kissed her neck, paying special attention the side just below her right ear where I knew she loved it.

While I did that, she wrapped her fingers through my thick hair. I used my lips and tongue on her flesh until she was biting her lip to keep from screaming. She didn't cry out and let whoever might be in the office today know what was going on inside her office.

I pulled away from her and got undressed and then I spread my shirt out on the couch and sat on it. I pulled her down so she was sitting backwards on my lap facing away from me. She used her legs to push herself up and I took my hot cock in my hand and rubbed it against her sensitive, wet bud. She was biting her lip hard and whimpering.

It didn't take long before she was coming with a silent scream and it didn't take much longer for me to follow. When we both calmed down, I let her off of my lap and she turned around and folded her body into mine.

"I hate this, but I have to get back to work."

I smiled. "I know, baby. Me, too." We stood to gather our clothes and I looked down at the couch and said, "Maybe you should have that couch cleaned before we open back up for business after the holidays." She laughed and I grabbed her again for another kiss. This one was long and deep and our tongues tangled up in a sexy dance. God, I love kissing her.

When we broke the kiss I said, “Don’t clean it just yet. I want to do that again.” We started to kiss again when my phone rang. I didn’t want to answer it, but finally I slid my finger across the screen and put it to my ear.

“Hey, bro, what’s up?” I brought my finger to my lips and then pressed the speaker button.

“Hey, Alex, what’s up?” The nonchalant sound of his voice pissed me off. I was still trying to process his involvement in all of this.

“Sorry, did I catch you at a bad time?” Alex asked.

“No, just taking a short break from work and have to get back in a few.”

“Well, first off, I wanted to thank you for the Giant’s tickets. I’m so stoked, you have to go with me, Okay?”

“I’ll have to see what’s going on here at work and let you know,” I said, trying not to let the disdain come through in my tone.

“Okay, secondly, I was wondering if you and Alicia would like to have dinner Saturday night? My parents will be in town. We’d love to see you, and I’d love for them to meet Alicia.”

I had a good relationship with Alex’s parents. It made me really sad to think of how crushed they would be when it came out that the son they were so proud of was nothing more than a crook. I looked at Alicia and she shrugged as if to tell me it was my decision. I sighed inwardly and told Alex,

“Sure, I’d love to see your parents. Where and what time?”

“At my place, say seven?”

“Okay, see you then,” I said before hanging up. Alicia put her arms back around me and laid her head on my chest.

“I know how hard this thing with Alex is hard on you. I’m sorry.”

I only nodded and held her for a few more minutes. Looking at my watch, I said, “I guess I should get back.”

“Thank you for lunch,” Alicia said with a smile.

I grinned at her. “Best lunch I’ve ever had.”

CHAPTER NINE

ALICIA

I was nervous about this dinner with Alex and his parents, mostly because the nervous energy coming off of Adam on the drive over was so thick in the car that you could cut it with a knife. When we pulled up in front of Alex’s big three-story house, I stopped Adam from opening the car door and asked him, “Are you okay?”

He nodded and started to get out again. I stopped him again. “Adam, words please. Can you do this, babe?”

“Yeah, baby,” he said. His voice was hoarse. I wasn’t so sure that he could pull this off, but before I could object again he was out of the car. He came around and opened my door but didn’t meet my eyes as he took my hand and led me up to the front door. I saw his hand tremble as he raised it up to knock. This was tearing him up and because of that, it was killing me. We’d gone to look at our own new house the night before. It was amazing and I loved it. Adam said he did, too, but he was so anxious about this dinner today that he couldn’t work up any enthusiasm for anything else.

“Hey! There they are.” Alex opened the front door. He was dressed casually in a golf shirt and jeans and he was wearing an apron. He grasped Adam’s hand and shook it hard and then leaned in and kissed my cheek. I felt nauseous at his touch, but tried to keep a neutral expression. “Come on in, guys. I’m so glad you could make it.”

I smiled at him because Adam wasn’t and I wanted to draw attention away from him. “Thank you for having us. Adam’s been excited about seeing your parents.”

“They’re excited to see you, too, buddy.” Adam finally managed a smile.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said. Alex led us into the den where there was an older couple waiting. They both got to their feet and Alex’s dad, who he

introduced as Bill, enveloped Adam in a big hug. His mother hugged him, too, and then they both shook my hand.

“Adam you look great!” Mr. Fritz told him. “It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Bill. Suzie, you look as beautiful as ever.”

The older lady blushed red.

“You always were a sweet-talker,” she said. “So, Alicia, you’re from England?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No ma’am, I’m Suzie. Can I get you two something to drink?”

“I got it, Mom. Have a seat.” Alex excused himself and came back with a carafe of coffee. “If you want something stiffer help yourself to the bar,” he told them. “I’m going to finish up dinner.”

“Do you need help?” I asked.

“Nope, you all stay out of my kitchen,” he said with a grin. “It’s almost finished.” Adam and Mr. Fritz fell into easy conversation and Mrs. Fritz turned to me and said,

“Alex tells me you’re getting married on Valentine’s Day?”

I smiled. One thing I loved talking about was marrying Adam. “Yes, at the Plaza. I’m really excited.”

“Good, it will be here before you know it. Mr. Fritz and I have been married thirty-five years this month.”

“Congratulations, that’s amazing.” I found out that she was easy to talk to. She wanted to hear all about our plans for the wedding. She seemed sincere in her praise and offered up a few tips of her own.

“Where are the two of you planning to honeymoon?”

“You know, that is the one detail that we haven’t discussed yet,” I told her.

“You should go to Hawaii,” Mrs. Fritz told her, “That’s where Alex’s father and I honeymooned. It was so lovely.”

“It does sound lovely,” I told her, “I’ve never been there.”

“We stayed in Oahu. It’s a beautiful island. The water in the ocean there is warm all the time, and so clear you can watch the fish swim by.”

“That would definitely be a nice change from the cold, dirty water we have here in New York, wouldn’t it?” I told her with a grin.

“Yes, dear, you would just love it. Waikiki is another beautiful place.”

I listened with sincere interest as Mrs. Fritz described the islands to in vivid detail. I was about to ask her how long it had been since they’d been there, when suddenly, all hell broke loose.

From outside of the house came a piercing scream. It sounded human and male, but when I went over the details of the night later with the police and in my own head I couldn’t have sworn to either. Before anyone could

react to that, however, the front door crashed in and two large men dressed all in black and wearing nylon masks over their faces burst inside.

“What the hell is going on here?” Mr. Fritz said, surprising them all by rushing towards the men.

“Dad, no!” Alex yelled as he was just coming into the room from the kitchen. The men were huge, and both were armed. He tried to grab for his father, but he was too late. One of the men swung his overly muscled arm out like a clothesline, striking the older man in the head and knocking him to the floor. Alex was pushed backwards and caught himself on a chair to keep from also tumbling to the floor.

Suzie Fritz screamed and Alex went over to her and held her back gently, but firmly as she tried to go to her husband. “You can’t help him if you get hurt yourself,” I heard him whisper to her.

Alex looked towards the men and asked, “What do you want?”

Adam had stepped protectively in front of me and we all held our breath and waited for the men to speak. Neither of them did. Mr. Fritz was beginning to rouse, and one of the men kicked at him with his foot until the poor old man had crawled all the way to the dining room to join the rest of us.

The man in front motioned at the other with his head. The man in the back nodded and began to approach them. He pointed his large, black gun at

us as he did, but didn't speak a word. He reached first for Alex's mother. As he grabbed her by the arm she screamed out Alex's name. Alex tried to hold on to her, but the man struck him with the butt of the gun, knocking him backwards.

The man forced the older woman to sit in one of the dining room chairs and then with the hand not holding the gun he reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of silver duct tape. He held it in my direction and grunted, motioning me towards Mrs. Fritz using a jerk of his head.

I knew what he wanted. He was telling me to tape the woman to the chair. I didn't want to do it, but I was smart enough to know that refusing to do something when a man had a gun pointed at you could get people killed. I sat my purse down on the table and took the tape. I whispered, "I'm sorry," to Alex's mother as I began to wrap it around her wrists and ankles and the arms and legs of the chair.

"It's okay, dear," the older woman said, making me want to smile at her. I loved the older generation. Even in times like this they seemed to remember their manners. One man had his gun on me, and the other on both Alex and Adam. Mr. Fritz sat slumped in a chair, still looking dazed.

"Can I make sure my Dad is okay?" Alex asked.

The man simply shook his head no. Alex looked distressed, but this time didn't try to move. The dark bruise forming on his cheek had

convinced him that not doing what these men told them to was a bad idea. After I finished with Mrs. Fritz's arms and legs, the man made a motion across his mouth with his hand and pointed back at her. I tore a piece of the duct tape about six inches long and placed it across the older woman's mouth. I could see tears forming in her eyes, and it made me feel like crying, too.

Afterwards, the man made me do the same to Adam, Alex, and lastly Mr. Fritz just as he seemed to be coming around. The man then taped me to a chair, while the other kept the gun trained on them. After we were all secured, the men left the room.

I could hear shuffling and commotion in the rest of the house as the men apparently tore things apart, looking for whatever it was they had come for. I tried to take comfort from the look of love that Adam gave me with his eyes. He was trying to convey to her that all would be okay. I tried once to smile at him, but the men had taped my mouth so tightly that the smile actually hurt. I glanced at Alex's parents. His father's eyes looked both sad and angry, and his mother had hers closed, a stray tear found its way down her cheeks every now and then. I looked at Alex then. He wasn't making eye contact with any of us. His eyes looked cold and angry to me.

After what seemed like hours, we heard the men leave through what was left of the front door. Adam waited several minutes to make sure they

hadn't returned, and then began to use his leg and arm muscles to wiggle his chair towards the dining room table. I watched, in awe of this strong, brave man that I loved as he used the corner of the table to peel the tape from his face. He got it off one side, leaving an angry red mark on his cheek and upper lip where it had clung. He then scooted towards where I left my clutch, and using his mouth again he opened it and after a great deal of effort he got my cell phone out. The small gun he had bought me to carry in my purse also fell out on the table. I could see Alex watching and the look of surprise on his face when he saw the gun.

Adam wasn't able to use his face to dial 911, but he was able to press the last number dialed with his nose. He laid his ear on the phone on the table and said,

"Come on, Kyla pick up."

"Hi, girl! Thought you had dinner plans tonight," Kyla said as she answered the phone.

"Kyla it's Adam."

"Adam? Is everything okay?"

"Not really, I need a really big favor, okay?"

"Absolutely boss, what's up?" she said.

"We're out at Alex Fritz's place on the Island. The address is 1112 North Sycamore Drive. I need you to call the police and have them come

out here right away.”

“The police? Adam, what’s going on?”

“Tell them there were two intruders here and they tied us up. We need help,” he looked over at Alex’s father and then said, “Maybe they should send an ambulance, too, just to make sure everyone is alright.”

I knew Kyla wanted to ask more questions, but the urgency in his voice made her simply say, “Okay, I’m on it,” instead.

Adam pushed the “End” button with his chin and then looked at them all and said, “Help is on the way, guys, hang tight.”

The police and an ambulance showed up within twenty minutes after Adam had spoken with Kyla. I heard a man’s voice outside say, “This guy needs medical,” and suddenly remembered the limo driver. He must have been who we had heard scream. I hoped he was alright.

Two uniformed officers came inside first. They had their guns drawn and did a search of the house before removing the tape from me and the others. As soon as they had gotten Alex freed, he grabbed his cell phone out of the drawer under the kitchen counter.

“Sir, no phone calls yet. We need to talk about what happened here first.”

Adam gave Alex a questioning look. Who would he be calling at a time like this?

Alex looked reluctant but he sat back down and as if suddenly remembering what had happened, he said, “Mom Dad, are you guys okay?”

His mother simply nodded, and his father looked angry again and said, “Fine, glad you held off on your call long enough to ask.” By that time, detectives were on the scene. The lead detective, a man named Jeffrey Stout asked whose house it was and Alex told him it was his. He then asked what had happened tonight, and Alex described the past forty-five minutes or so to him.

The detective took the names and relationships of everyone in the room, and then asked,

“Did any of you recognize anything about either of these men?”

We all said that we did not.

“Mr. Fritz, do you have any idea what they were looking for?”

Alex ran his hands across his face and through his hair before saying, “I am the East Coast campaign manager for the President. I don’t know if they thought there would be money, or campaign information here...there’s not. I don’t keep anything like that here. It’s all strictly confidential and it is kept at campaign headquarters.”

“Hmm,” the detective said, as he made a note on his pad. “You don’t seem to have very good security here for a man who is so important.”

Alex looked like he was getting frustrated with the detective. He stood up and said, “I just told you, I don’t keep anything confidential here. I don’t have money here. I don’t even own a safe. I didn’t think I needed more security than I have.”

“Sir, please sit down,” the detective asked him. Alex wasn’t used to having people tell him what to do anymore, but in this case, he did as he was told.

“Mr. Hanson, I recall that recently your ex-wife was murdered in an apparent robbery. Do you think there may be any relation here?”

Adam shook his head slowly and said, “None that I can think of. They arrested Miles Brigham IV for Marjorie’s murder. I obviously don’t believe he’s guilty, since my firm is handling his case. The problem there is that I don’t know who killed Marjorie, or why, so I couldn’t really say if this was related or not.”

The detective made another note and then said, “Ms. Winston, you’re from the UK?”

Alicia told him she was and he said, “You can’t think of anything at all that was familiar about these men?”

“No, they had on masks, their builds were both very large, and I don’t even know anyone that big. Their hair was covered and they never spoke.”

“Yes, that’s what makes me think maybe one of you knew them. They didn’t want their voices, or their accents to be recognized.”

“Their accents?” Alicia asked,

“Yes, the man outside, Frank, the limo driver, heard them speak when they thought he was unconscious. He said they spoke with British accents.”

“I really didn’t recognize them...” Alicia began.

“I believe you,” the detective told her, “just heard your accent and thought, maybe... Anyways, I’d like to get each of your statements individually. The EMTs are going to take Mr. Fritz to Mercy and have him checked out. Mrs. Fritz, you are welcome to go with him if you like, I’ll check in with the two of you later.”

Mrs. Fritz already had her coat on and her purse in her hand. The EMTs had put Mr. Fritz on a gurney, despite his protests. She thanked the detective and followed them as they took him out the door. The detective looked at Alex and said,

“Mr. Fritz, before we begin the interviews let’s take a walk through the house. You can tell me if it looks like anything is missing.”

Alex reluctantly followed the detective out of the room. Adam put his arm around me and pulled me in close, kissing my temple. "You okay?"

I turned towards him where his arms could envelop me “I’m fine, just wish things like this would stop happening to us.”

He kissed me on top of the head and said, “Me, too, baby.”

Alex and the detective were gone about half an hour. Adam made coffee, and he and I were at the table sipping a cup when they came back in the room. Alex looked more agitated than he had before. The detective asked which of them wanted to go first, and I volunteered, hoping it would give Adam a chance to talk to him.

CHAPTER TEN

ADAM

When Alicia and the detective had stepped out, I asked, “Was anything taken?”

Alex looked beat. His eyes were rimmed in red and he had run his fingers through his hair so many times it was sticking up on top and out on the sides. He looked at me and said,

“Some files from the cabinet in my study. It was nothing important. I don’t think they even looked at them. Just grabbed ‘em.”

“Why don’t you sit, Alex? You look like you’re about to fall down.”

Alex nodded, and I thought he was about to sit down,

“Let me get you a cup of coffee,” I said, before realizing that instead of sitting Alex was headed back to the counter between the dining room and

kitchen to grab his cell phone. “Who the hell do you need to call so badly?” I asked him.

“I need to make sure my people know what happened before the press gets a hold of this. We need to prepare a statement. Reassure everyone that nothing pertaining to the campaign, or donators was taken.”

“I think your parents are right, you do need a vacation. You should see yourself right now,” I told him.

Alex seemed to not hear me. He dialed the phone and stepped into the other room as I was still talking. I stood up and walked nearer to the partition that separated the two rooms. I could hear Alex talking, but couldn't quite make out what he was saying. I stepped closer, and suddenly Alex pulled open the swinging door and said,

“What are you doing?”

I decided not to even try lying. I was tired of this entire mess and just wanted some answers. “I want to know what's going on, Alex. I want to know what you've gotten yourself involved in.”

Alex didn't say anything for a few moments, and I thought he wasn't going to answer. Finally, he said, “Okay, but not here. After the police leave, I'll meet you somewhere and we'll talk. I've needed someone to talk to for a while now. Please, though, don't say anything else until they're gone.”

The detective that brought Alicia back was just leaving the room so I only nodded at him. He turned to me and said, “You still okay?” She smiled at him and nodded.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALICIA

Adam left to go with the detective for his interview. Alex went back into the kitchen with his phone and left me alone in the dining room. I picked up my phone and saw there was a text message. It was from David. He said he was nearby, but as long as we were okay, he didn’t want to come in and blow his cover. I texted him back and said we were okay. I asked if he knew what was going on. His next text said,

“Yes. Have the two men in custody, we will talk tomorrow.”

The detectives at last told Adam and me that we could go home. Alex was planning to go to Mercy hospital to check on his parents. Adam offered to go with him. Alex hesitated, and then accepted Adam’s offer.

Undoubtedly, it would give them a chance to talk. I was okay with driving myself home, but Adam didn’t like the idea. We were all still shaken up by what had happened tonight, and he didn’t want me to be alone. He called Kyla, and while we were waiting for the contractor that Alex must have

paid a fortune to come out so late at night to hang a new door, she arrived to take me home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADAM

When the new door was finished, Alex and I headed to the hospital. I drove, as I was becoming more concerned about Alex's state of mind by the minute. I wasn't sure if it was Alex's anxiety about how his parents were doing, his anger about his home being violated, or what he had said earlier about needing to talk, but it was blatantly obvious that he had something heavy weighing on his mind.

We drove silently for the first few miles, and then Alex broke the silence at last by saying,

"I hope we can still be friends, after I tell you what I have to say."

I glanced sideways at my friend. I felt only pity for him right now, but I knew it was due to the situation, and soon the anger at what Alex had been involved in would return. I only gave a slight nod of my head and waited for him to go on.

"I've got myself in over my head, Adam. I don't know what to do. This all started out to be my dream. The job I always wanted, and I knew I would

be good at it...I am good at it, when I'm left alone and allowed to do it," he sighed heavily and raked his hand through his hair and down across his face again. "But, there's too much money involved, too much power at stake, people just can't leave it alone."

"What people?" I asked as we merged into the swarm of traffic waiting to pay their toll to cross the bridge that led back into the city.

"People like Brigham who wanted to control me because he felt like I owed him something for installing me in this position and others, bad people. These aren't people you mess with, Adam. I mean, my career is not all that is at stake here. They are coming after my family now."

"Alex, You're not making a lot of sense."

He sighed again, "I know, I just don't know where to start. The jest of it is this...I was placed in my position by Brigham, to control the funds that were coming in to the campaign and make sure that the people who were elected would be 'sympathetic' to his cause. That is, look the other way when it came to his shoddy practices in the Gulf, and stand up to the EPA when they started breathing down his neck.

"It sounds a little shady, I know, but I looked at it as an opportunity to do enough good that it would overshadow the other things I was doing. The President is a good man. He hasn't been in office long enough to do all of the good that I know he can do. I thought that I was doing some of what it

would take to allow him to fulfill the promises he had made to the American people in the future. I did my job well, and I was doing such a good job, that money literally started pouring in. That kind of money began to attract the attention of other people.”

He got quiet again as we made the turn into the hospital parking lot. I found a space and turned off the ignition. I looked at Alex and said,

“Who were these other people?”

“First, I met a man named Johnston at one of the fundraisers. He said his boss owned a large textile company in the UK and was planning on moving it into the States. He said they wanted to support American politics in an effort to ease their transition. Again, not exactly the most honorable motives or intentions, but I told myself that as long as the money was coming in, the President could get re-elected and that was the end goal, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer, I knew the question had been rhetorical.

Alex continued, “Their money started pouring in, and at first it was all good. Then, I met the man at the top, Mr. Grant. He’s a refined, smooth-talking, mean son-of-a-bitch. He told me, in the politest way possible, that he had arranged for Vick to be killed. He said he was going to make sure that Miles Brigham IV was found to be responsible for it, and he said I was going to make sure that the money he had put into the campaign stayed

liquid enough to be moved around. He introduced me to his son, Jack. Jack became my main contact after that and let me tell you Adam, Alicia is lucky to be rid of that snake.”

“So,” I said, still trying to grasp all of what Alex was telling me. “The point of killing Vick was to frame Miles?”

“I guess,” Alex said, sounding wearier than ever. “You see, Grant had approached Vick before he and Miles had their falling out. Miles told Vick to blow him off. Brigham runs his own shady deals, but he knew these guys were going to be trouble of the very worst kind, and he told Vick so. Vick said thanks but no thanks and went on with his life. Problem was, when Miles found out that Vick was sleeping with his daughter’s boyfriend, he wasn’t willing to stand behind him any longer. This gave Grant the opportunity he needed to get rid of both Vick and Miles. Kill Vick and his boyfriend, and frame Brigham. Unfortunately, the boyfriend got away, and no one has been able to get to him. He’s surrounded by Feds and Grant’s people want no part of that. They didn’t see him as a big enough player to worry about, anyways.”

Alex took another break. He started to open the car door to get out, but I stopped him by saying, “What about Marjorie? What did she do to get involved in this mess?”

Alex looked surprised, and by the look on his face I thought he was going to deny knowing anything about that. Instead, his denial seemed to turn into resignation and he said,

“They went there looking for you. I swear, Adam, I didn’t know about it beforehand or I would have stopped them somehow. Jack is obsessed with Alicia, Adam. You have to keep him away from her. I was there when he heard the news about Marjorie. He was livid. He said the fools were supposed to have ‘gotten rid of the buffoon who thinks he’s going to marry his girl’. They were supposed to have gone in and made it look like a robbery. Kill you, and leave Alicia grieving. Jack believed that would be enough to push her right back into his arms.

“Instead, they found Marjorie alone. She was never one to do things the easy way; I don’t have to tell you that. They said she gave them hell, scratching and clawing at them like a wild-cat. She wouldn’t shut-up and the men, afraid someone would come up to the apartment to find out what was happening, had killed her. They tried to make it look like a suicide, but she had fought them too hard, and the murder was apparent. They weren’t worried, though. They knew you would be the primary suspect, and Jack paid that journalist, Rose Dugan, a pretty penny to skew everything she wrote against you. He even fed her information that he had gotten from a bug he’d planted in your offices.”

I was trying to process all of this information. The attorney part of me was already going over in my head what kind of charges Alex was apt to face over all of this. I had one more question,

“Was that all the break-in was for at the office? Just to plant the bugs?”

“Partly, but remember, they still wanted to ruin Brigham, as well. Stealing his files was all part of their end game. They took the others, just to try and make it all look random.”

“And what about tonight? The detective said the driver heard their accents, and they were English. Was that Grant?”

“Tonight was about making me pay for trying to stand up to them. I tried to tell them I didn’t want to be a part of this anymore. They didn’t take it too well. This was why I didn’t want my parents staying at the house. I was afraid they would try to get to them when I wasn’t at home. I should have done more to protect them.”

Alex opened the door the rest of the way then and said, “I don’t know what you’ll do with all of this information, but I know that you’re too honest of a guy to let it go. I’m okay with that. I’m tired. I want it all to be over. Right now, though, I need to see my parents and make sure they’re okay. I’ll be expecting the authorities when I get home.”

He stepped out of the car and without allowing me to say anything else he closed the door and headed up the walk towards the front entrance. I

watched him go, all the while trying to figure out in my head what kind of deal I would ask for after Alex agreed to testify against all of these people and I became his attorney.

I drove back to the city, home to Alicia. Tonight, I just wanted to lie in her arms and think only about her and how happy she makes me. Tomorrow with a clear head, I would think over all of what Alex had told me before calling David.

I wanted to offer my services to Alex, and convince him to tell David what he had told me tonight himself. I was still angry at my friend for allowing himself to become involved with these people, but I could see the anguish in his eyes and hear it in his voice.

Alex was in over his head. He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a bad guy. He had gotten drunk on power and allowed it all to go to his head and cloud his judgment. I would have to give some thought to the bad press that representing the man who had been somewhat involved in the murder of my ex-wife, but I honestly believed that deep inside Alex was still the person I had grown so close to over the years. He was the friend that had stood up for me at my first wedding, and sat up with me at night through the bad times with Marjorie.

I would have to convince everyone else that the true bad guys here were the ones who would kill a man, and frame someone else for it, and kill a

woman who just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time.

I thought about how glad I was for Alicia's good judgment in not waiting to talk to Kyla about Jack; he was a lot more dangerous than either of us had thought. Alicia had been getting a bad feeling from him from the start, but I had mostly written my dislike of the man off to simple jealousy. I hadn't wanted this man who was so obviously still in love with my fiancé to keep popping up in our lives. I shuddered when I thought about how many times Alicia had been alone with the man. I pressed harder on the accelerator, aching to get back and hold her in my arms.

Kyla had gone home by the time I got there, but Alicia was waiting up for me. She could see in my eyes and the sag of my shoulders how tired I was. She didn't ask me to talk about it. She simply took me by the hand and led me to bed. After helping me strip out of my clothes she curled her soft, warm body up next to mine and just let me hold her.

Somehow, she was always able to sense exactly what I needed, and when I needed it. My last conscious thoughts that night were that I had never felt so emotionally connected to anyone in my life, and to remember to thank God for giving her to him, and keeping her safe.

EPILOGUE

2 YEARS LATER

ALICIA

“What are you doing here?” Kyla was staring at me as I got off the elevator in front of my office like I had two heads. She was also glancing nervously up and down the hallway.

“I work here, or did you forget? And, nice to see you, too, by the way.”

She snorted out a laugh. “No, I didn’t forget you work here but are you supposed to be out driving yourself around? You look like you’re going to pop. And, nice to see you, too,” she added with a little smile.

“I feel like I’m going to pop. I almost wish I would. I’m ready for him to come out. No, I didn’t drive I got a ride with the service.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I have an appointment at two and it was already noon and Adam hadn’t had time to pick me up yet. It also seems silly for him to drive all the way out to pick me up when he’s already in the city. I just took the car service.”

“Does Adam know you’re here?”

“Adam is not my...shit! Okay fine, he is my boss, but he’s not the boss of me. He won’t be mad so stop looking so nervous. I’m pregnant, I’m not an invalid.” I walked toward my office and noticed two things. Carla was not at her desk and there was no activity or noise in the hallway, at all.

“Where is Carla?”

“Um...she was running an errand. She'll be right back.”

“An errand in the middle of the work day?” That didn't sound like Carla to me. As a matter of fact, the whole floor seemed eerily quiet.

“Where is everyone else?”

“Busy, busy,” Kyla said. I rolled my eyes and waddled on into my office. Kyla followed me. She was acting all weird and nervous.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

I went over and pushed my chair back about two feet from my desk so I could sit down and there would be room for my belly. I loved this baby growing inside of me from the moment I knew he was there, but I'm ready for him to come out. The doctor says two more weeks. My parents will fly out in one week. I'm hoping if I do a lot of walking, we can compromise.

“Where's Nico?”

“Alex is appearing in front of the grand jury this week... I'm sure Adam told you.” Adam had told me.

Alex ultimately agreed to testify against everyone involved in the misappropriation of the campaign funds and the murders of Vick and Marjorie. Jack tried to flee back to the U.K. when he heard but the Marshalls had picked him up at La Guardia. The FBI had been working on

having his father extradited since he was the ringleader of the whole group but so far they haven't had any luck. Jack's father was going to leave his son to take the fall for all of it. It took me some time to come to terms with the fact that my childhood friend had resorted to extortion, theft, and maybe even murder over money that he never really needed. He's a brilliant man. He's an attorney. All he ever had to do was work for it.

“Yeah, he told me.”

“Nico is in with him right now going over his testimony because Adam couldn't get out of this EPA thing.”

“When is Jack's next court date?”

“His new lawyer has drawn up a motion to dismiss. He says that the only evidence the state and the feds have against Jack is Alex's testimony and they want the case dismissed.”

“Who is his new attorney?”

“Hal Rogers.”

I had just opened a bottle of water and taken a drink. I choked on it. “You're kidding me? Hal is representing one of the men responsible for Marjorie's death and Adam the other? She has to be rolling in her grave.”

As it turned out, Jack and his father were more involved in the murders than anyone else. Jack hadn't actually committed them, but he'd paid people to do it. I shudder every time I think about how close I came to

losing Adam because of Jack's simple jealousy and need for instant gratification. It makes me sick.

"Poor Adam mumbled something this morning about not being able to get rid of the guy," Kyla said. She reached up to touch her face and something sparkly caught my eye.

"What is that on your finger?"

Kyla looked down at the ring and her whole face glowed. "Nico proposed last night."

"Oh my God!" I tried to get up. I was struggling and she saw me so she came to me. She took my hands and helped me stand up and I embraced her as much as I could in my condition. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to. This morning has just been crazy..."

"Kyla!" The sound of Adam's voice wafted down the hall. Kyla looked nervous again. What the heck is going on? "I should go see what he wants," she said.

"Adam! She's in here with me."

Kyla gave me a tight-lipped stare. When Adam walked into the office she relaxed her stare and said, "I'm going to go have some lunch with Nico. Call if you need me." Adam's eyes were focused on me.

"Okay, call me later?" I asked Kyla.

"I will try," she said with a smile before she left.

“I thought you promised to wait for me to come and get you.”

“I didn’t see that it made a difference. I wasn’t driving. I was going stir crazy.”

He gave me a sympathetic look and came over around behind the desk and took my hands in his and pulled me to my feet. He kissed my lips and then he bent down and gave my belly a soft kiss. I loved when he did that, it was so sweet. “How is my baby boy today?”

“He is active,” I said. “How is his big daddy?” I asked with a smile.

“He’s the luckiest man in the world. I have a wife that is gorgeous, sexy, smart, funny...and I know that you’re going to be the best mom ever to my son that I get to meet very soon. If everything else in my life was taken away at this moment, that would all still be more than enough.” He kissed me softly on the forehead. I reached up and put my hand on the side of his face and asked,

“Things are going okay with the EPA?”

“The EPA?”

“Didn’t you and Mac just have a meeting with them?”

“Oh...yeah, we did.” It wasn’t like Adam to be absent-minded, just like it wasn’t like Carla to run errands during the day. Something was definitely up.

“Why is everyone acting so weird?”

“I didn’t notice anyone acting weird.”

“Why is it so quiet in here?”

“Everyone is hard at work.”

“Why is Nico in there prepping Alex instead of you?”

“You and I had an appointment. I thought I was leaving early to pick you up, so I asked Nico to do it.” As he talked, he was walking us through my office and out into the hall.

“I’m sorry you had to miss it because of the appointment. I could have handled that. I just want the doctor to ask this child if he’s ever coming out.”

“Think about it, he’s in his warm, beautiful Mommy’s tummy getting everything he needs, why would he want to come out. It’s cold out here.”

“Well, I’m ready to see him, and I promise to bundle him up.”

Adam chuckled and continued to propel me out into the hall way. He was leading me down where the conference room was. I still didn’t see another living soul. Surely everyone hadn’t gone out to run an errand or interview a client all at once. It was never this quiet in here.

“Adam...” He pushed open the conference room door and reached around to flip on the light. The room came alive with noise and people and color. There was a big blue banner that said, “Welcome to the world Little Lord Hanson.” That’s what our colleagues had taken to calling the baby

growing in my belly. All of our colleagues were packed into the room. There were baby decorations and a three-tier cake and a table filled with gifts.

I rubbed my belly and said, “Look how loved you are little man. Look how many lawyers set aside their billable hours for you. Do you know how huge that is?”

Adam laughed. I felt him lean down and kiss the side of my neck.

“When the boss says put aside your billable hours and go to a baby shower employees jump.”

“I see that. This is amazing.” I hugged him. “Thank you, baby. I’m going to go in and say hello to everyone.”

“There’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Turn around Alicia and let me see my grandson.”

I turned toward my mother’s voice. I talk to her nearly every day on the phone, but it had been over a year since I’d seen them. First she was sick and then Dad was sick and then I was too pregnant to fly. I’d had a few crying spells over it recently and as usual, Adam had found a way to make it right.

This is what love is. It’s not about a business or money. It’s not about being from the same background or believing in all of the same things. It’s

simply about caring so deeply about another human being that you will take time out of your day to make sure theirs is special. Love is something that you're willing to keep fighting for because you know that in the end it's going to be worth it. It's always looking forward and not judging the one you love by what's happened in the past.

I felt Adam's arms encircle my waist and he stroked his fingers gently across my swollen belly and buried his face in my hair. This is love. Adam is love and I'm the luckiest girl in the world.

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From the Author

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BILLIONAIRE'S FIANCE

By Alexa Davis

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From the Author

I hope you enjoy Billionaire's Fiance. [If you want to get an email as soon as my next book is published then click here.](#) I'll also include you in all the giveaways I do automatically.

CHAPTER ONE

Max

"Listen, *zhopa*," Kristov said. "Papa is giving you a chance to prove that you're capable of handling this part of the business, so handle it!"

"Asshole? I'm an asshole now?" I said without looking up. I pulled several small jewelry boxes out of the larger box that had been delivered a few hours earlier and began examining the contents of each one. "Why am I an asshole for wanting to do something different?"

"Because Papa is giving you the opportunity of a lifetime to prove yourself," he replied as he slipped a cigarette between his lips and flicked his lighter. "You'll earn your stars, *bratik*. Don't you want to earn your stars?"

"Not particularly," I said as I avoided his gaze. He knew how much it irritated me when he called me little brother, and yet he did it anyway. "I

don't care about any of that bullshit. I don't want stars or crosses or churches or any other ink on my body. Can't you understand that?"

"I can," he nodded as he inhaled deeply and then blew the smoke at me in precisely formed rings. "But Papa can't, so it falls on me to entice you back to the fold."

"Kristov, I don't know how to say it any more clearly than I already have," I coughed as I shot him an annoyed look. He smiled like a Cheshire cat and waited. "I don't want to have anything to do with the family business. I don't want to be part of the gang or be *vory v zakone*. I want to start my own jewelry business and operate it legitimately. I don't want help or muscle or anything at all. I just want peace. Can't you understand that?"

Kristov silently watched me unpack the boxes and smoked as he considered my rejection of his offer. We'd been like this since we were children. He was the older brother who was always charged with bringing me into line when I decided to go my own way, and when I had been younger and weaker, it had worked. But now we were adults and, while I would always be younger than he was, I would never be weaker again.

"*Bratik*, you can do whatever you want, but you owe Papa," he said as his smile shifted from brotherly to something more sinister.

"Owe Papa what?" I asked.

"He gave you the money that you used to buy that beautiful place you live in and start this business," he said before taking a deep drag of his cigarette and exhaling in my face. "And now, you owe him some respect and reciprocity; got it?"

"Kristov, I'm going to say this one time and one time only, so listen well, my brother," I began as I stopped unpacking boxes and looked at him. "I don't want to be a thief-in-law, I don't want to run with the *bratán*, and I don't owe Papa anything. Not a cent. Mama gave me what was rightfully mine and told me to do with it what I wished."

We stood in the small space staring each other down as we waited for the other to look away first. Kristov finally looked away and shrugged as he chuckled. He threw the still burning butt of his cigarette on the floor and ground it into the carpet as he stared at me, smiling. I willed my face to remain impassive and waited for him to speak. He said nothing; he only smiled, shook his head, and moved toward me so he could roughly pat my shoulder. He walked to the door, turned and looked at me one more time, then shook his head as he smiled and walked out the door.

"You'll regret this, *bratik*," he tossed over his shoulder as he exited, leaving the door wide open.

I quickly crossed the room and shut the door behind him before I turned and leaned against it as I sunk to the floor and put my head in my hands. In

my heart, I wanted to believe that my father would never do anything to hurt me, no matter how pissed off he was, but my logical brain, the one that had grown up with a father who led the South Side Chicago Russian Mafia, knew that my father would do whatever he had to in order to protect the brotherhood – even if that meant neutralizing his own son.

CHAPTER TWO

Lexi

"Josh?" I called as I entered the apartment and saw suitcases sitting near the door. "Josh? What's going on?"

"Oh hey, Sugar," he said as he flashed me his biggest and brightest toothpaste-ad smile. "I wasn't expecting you for another hour!"

"How many times do I have to ask you not to call me that? You know I hate it," I said, then turned and looked at the packed bags. "What's going on? Are you going somewhere?"

"Uh, yeah," he replied as he dug through the junk drawer in the entryway table, pulling out rubber bands, a comb, a handful of peppermints we'd gotten at an Italian restaurant in the Chicago Loop, and a stack of notepads from every hotel we'd ever stayed at. "I'm going on a trip. I was kind of hoping we wouldn't have to do this, though. Not tonight."

"Do what? Where are you going?" I asked as I watched him dig deeper, looking for something specific.

"Um, well, see..." he trailed off as he pulled out a rainbow-colored super ball, a travel flashlight, and a handful of AA batteries. "Look, I didn't want to do it this way, but since you're here, I might as well go ahead."

"Josh? You're scaring me," I said. I looked from him to the contents of the junk drawer that now laid spread out on the top of the table.

"Lexi, I got a call from an agent in LA. I got a part in that sitcom I auditioned for last fall and they want me in LA by next week to get fitted for the wardrobe and do some readings with the rest of the cast."

"That's great news!" I exclaimed. "We've been waiting for this break for so long, and now, you've got the part! Oh, Josh, that's so awesome! When do we move? God, I'm going to need to get boxes and call the movers! How much time do we have?"

"Well, see, that's the thing," he shrugged hesitating a little. "Look, it's been a good run, Lex, we were good together, but this is where our paths diverge and we go in different directions."

I stared at him in stunned silence.

"Wait, are you trying to tell me that you're breaking up with me?" I said. To say I was surprised was the understatement of the century.

"Yeah, I guess I am," he shrugged. "It just seems like the right thing to do at this point. I don't want to keep you hanging on here in Chicago while I head to LA and pursue my dream job. Long distance never really works, you know."

"So, you're breaking up with me as you're packing to leave?" I shouted. "You couldn't have given me any kind of warning that this was coming?"

"No, not really," he said calmly. "I mean, I didn't know if I was going to get the part or not, so I didn't want to act prematurely."

"So you thought you'd just hang on until you heard yes or no, and then you'd break the news?" I was furious, but tried to channel the calm that I'd learned in my improv classes. "And now that you've found out that the answer is yes, you're leaving me behind?"

"Yeah, that's exactly how it worked! Man, you're really something, Lex!" He moved toward me to give me a hug, but I backed up and held out an arm.

"Do not come any closer or you will most likely lose a part of yourself that you will probably need in your new sitcom," I said through clenched teeth.

"What's wrong, Sugar? Found it!" he asked as he took another look through the junk drawer and turned triumphantly holding up the item he was looking for. It was a small troll doll with neon green hair wearing a

rainbow tunic I'd made for it when Josh and I were undergrads at Northwestern.

"Do. Not. Ever. Call. Me. That. Again," I said in a staccato voice as I pushed my back against the wall and tried to remain standing. I would not lose my cool while he was standing in front of me.

"Jeez, Lex, lighten up a little," he said as he tucked the troll into the outer pocket of the larger suitcase and zipped it in. "Look, I didn't do this on purpose. It just happened. I have an opportunity to do what I've always wanted to do, and I'm taking it. Is that so wrong?"

"It is if you're leaving me behind to clean up your mess," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"What about the rent here? Have you thought about the fact that there is no way on earth I can afford to pay it on my own and that we have eight months left on our lease?" I said no longer containing my fury. "You're going to run out and follow your dream, but you're going to stick me with the bill?"

"Oh yeah, that," he said. "Well, I'll try to send some money to you as soon as I get paid for my first episode or something, but don't expect too much. LA is really expensive, and I've got a whole bunch of things I need to do out there."

"Josh, you are...you are..." I sputtered as I tried to come up with a word that would accurately describe him without relying on vulgarities. I couldn't come up with anything, so I yelled, "You're an asshole!"

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry you feel that way," he said and flashed me a sympathetic look that I recognized as one of the expressions I'd helped him perfect when he was auditioning for the role of a pediatric oncologist.

"How can you do this, Josh?" I shouted as I held back a sob. "How can you just pick up and leave me like this? Don't you love me?"

"Oh, baby, I love you," he said, reaching out to run his fingers down my cheek. "I just feel like I need to explore the options being presented. It's only fair to take advantage of the opportunities after I've done so much work to get where I am."

"But what about me?" I said as the tears welled up. "Don't you want me to come with you? We've worked hard together to get this far."

"Sugar, look, it's been a fun ride and we've been good together," he said as I felt the anger boiling under the surface. "But we're just not meant to walk the next path together, you know. There are some walks you have to take alone."

"Are you fucking quoting Hunger Games while you break up with me?" I asked, narrowing my eyes and shooting him a drop-dead look. "And, don't call me that. You know I hate it."

"Yeah, I guess I am," he grinned. "Well, it works for just about everything, now, doesn't it?"

"You're unbelievable." I shook my head as I stepped back and looked at him with fresh eyes. "I can't believe that I loved you enough to want to make a life with you."

"Oh c'mon, Lexi, we were never that serious," he said as he impatiently checked his luggage tags to make sure he had his LA address on them. "We were college lovers who knew that some day we'd go our separate ways."

"You're delusional," I said. "Don't you remember that night on the roof of the Carlton Hotel when we had drinks and watched a movie under the stars and you said you hoped our whole life together would be just like that?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" he said as he pulled out his wallet and double-checked that he had enough cash for the curb check-in. "Oh, you mean that night when it was too hot to be inside and we decided that a free movie was better than being stuck in a sweltering apartment?"

"You're rewriting our entire relationship!" I cried. "It wasn't like that! We were in love!"

"You were in love, Lex, not me," he said as he looked up at me. "I love you, but not like that. And, I'm certainly not going to throw away a chance

at a real acting career out of guilt or a few words I said after one too many martinis on the roof of the Carlton."

"You're heartless," I whispered. I wanted to scream at him, pound on his chest, and make him admit that he had felt something for me. That he had loved me and still did, but my pride won out and I kept silent as he slung his travel bag over his shoulder and grabbed the handle of his suitcase before heading for the door.

"I'm not heartless, Lex," he said as he turned the knob, opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. "I'm pragmatic, and there's a huge difference between the two. Take care of yourself, Sugar." And with that, he pulled the door toward him until the latch clicked quietly.

"DON'T FUCKING CALL ME THAT!" I screamed at the door as I grabbed a sculpture from the hall table and threw it so hard that it shattered into a million pieces when it hit the wall. Then, I sank to the floor and sobbed as if my heart was breaking, which I was almost certain it was.

CHAPTER THREE

Max

I quickly cleared my head and got back to work unpacking the inventory I'd ordered. I had a lot to accomplish before the store was scheduled to open in two weeks and I didn't have the time to have a meltdown over my brother's threat. As I inspected each piece of jewelry and placed it back in its box, I thought about how to best handle this situation. Visiting my father was out of the question. He'd sent Kristov to bring me back, so confronting him wasn't going to be a viable option. I knew I needed someone to help me plead my case, though, so I made a quick decision to head up to see my grandmother. If anyone could help me, it would be her.

"Hello, Babi!" I called as I knocked on her screen door and pulled it open. Babi had lived on the bottom floor of a two-flat walk up on Newgard

for as long as I could remember. She'd come over from Moscow when I was small, but she hadn't wanted to live with us like most grandmothers. She was a stubborn woman, which explained a lot about my father, but she lavished love in the form of traditional Russian food on all of her children and grandchildren. I couldn't remember a time when Babi wasn't cooking and today was no exception.

"Maksimka!" she called from the kitchen. "Come in here and give your Babi a kiss!"

I laughed as I crossed the front room and headed for the kitchen. Babi's house looked like it had been picked up and transported directly from her apartment in Moscow. The room was wallpapered in blue and gold foil that ran from the ceiling to the floor and made me feel like I was on the inside of a fancy box of chocolates. Her furniture was heavy oak that was intricately carved and faithfully polished by the housekeeping crew my father had hired to make sure she wouldn't have to do anything but cook and visit friends and family. Babi rolled her eyes at this luxury, but she allowed it because she knew it made my father feel good about providing for her.

"Babi!" I said as I pushed open the door to the kitchen and found my grandmother taking a piping hot loaf of bread from the oven. I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek as she set it on the cooling rack and closed the oven door.

"Maksimka, give me a hug!" she demanded as she grabbed my arm and pulled me to her. I was more than foot taller than her, but she had strong arms and if she wanted a hug, she got a hug. When she was satisfied, she looked up at me and said, "I've got a pot of *ukha* on the stove, sit down and let me give you a bowl!"

"Babi, I'm not hungry," I protested, knowing that it would be futile.

"Nonsense," she dismissed me as she pulled out a bowl and began ladling out the rich fish soup that reminded me of holidays and happy times with my family. "You are always hungry, and I always feed you."

I threw my hands in the air, but sat down at the kitchen table to watch her bustle around ladling soup, cutting a thick slice of hot, dark bread for me, and putting it on the table with butter. She was right, of course, I was always hungry, but I'd come to discuss a serious matter with her and I didn't want food to interfere with the talk I was about to initiate. I had no idea how my grandmother would respond, but I was desperate for a solution that wouldn't tear the family apart.

"Babi, this is delicious," I said as I dipped the thick bread into the broth and tucked it in my mouth.

"Of course, it is," she smiled. "Your Babi only makes delicious food! Now, why are you here, Maksimka?"

"You know me too well," I laughed as I continued dipping bread and putting it into my mouth. "I have a problem, Babi, and I need advice. Only, I'm not sure if there is a solution that will make anyone happy."

"Stop beating around the bush, tell me what you need," she said as she worked the dough for another loaf of bread.

"Papa wants me to join the family business, and he sent Kristov to make me do it," I began. I felt stupid once it came out of my mouth, but Babi had never been one to judge before she heard the whole story.

"And, what's the problem with you saying no?" she asked as she flipped the ball of dough and began pounding it on the counter.

"Kristov said that I am not going to be allowed to say no," I said. "He told me that Papa wants me to get my stars and become *vore y zakone*, but I don't want to. I don't want to be part of the brotherhood of the Russian Mafia. I just want to run my jewelry business and stay out of the way."

"I understand, but why don't you want to be with family, Maksimka?" she asked. "It's an honor to be *vore y zakone*. Your Dadushka ran a very efficient organization in Moscow. He was a good man, Maksimka. Your papa is a very good man, too."

"I know, Babi," I said quietly as I finished my soup and watched her move across the kitchen and cut into the cooling loaf. She sliced a big piece and set it in front of me.

"Eat. The *coulibiac* is best hot," she ordered.

"Babi, I'm full!" I protested as I lifted my fork and cut into the delicious mix of fish, rice, hardboiled eggs, mushrooms, and dill. It had always been my favorite dish and no matter how full I was, I always had room for *coulibiac*.

"Maksimka, your father has built a loyal following here in Chicago, and it has taken him many years to do it. He wants to leave his business to his sons, the same way his father left the business to him many years ago," she said as she turned back to her dough and began shaping it so she could stuff it with sweet goat cheese. "You need to understand that the family business is not just money or paper. It's blood. It's honor. It's tradition."

"I know, Babi, I know," I said nodding my head as I chewed. "I'm not trying to deny the tradition or the importance of it, I just don't want to be a part of it! I wasn't made the same way Kristov was, I don't have that ability to be cold and calculating the way he and Papa can be. I don't want to do what they do."

Babi nodded as she worked the dough and then added the cheese before folding over the edges to form a rounded crust that would puff up and brown around the cheese. As she worked, I could see that she was thinking, so I didn't interrupt her. When she was ready, she turned and spoke.

"Maksimka, I know you want to go your own way, but I'm not sure you can," she said. My eyes widened as I listened to her explain my options. "I think you're always going to have to have one foot in the family business, even if you don't want to. Otherwise, you are going to find that it is a very lonely world out there and that it's not very safe when you don't have family backing you up. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I think so," I nodded as I swallowed hard. "But, Babi, I can't do what they do. I don't want to do it."

"Sometimes, you have to do things you don't want to do, Maksimka," she said giving me a knowing look. "Sometimes, you have to put family first and swallow the idea that you can step out on your own and do anything differently."

As she spoke, I began to feel hopeless. I didn't want to be a thug or a mafia boss, but it didn't look like I was going to have much choice in the matter. What Babi was telling me was that family always came first and what I wanted would be shoved aside to make room for the needs of my family. I felt the anger rising from the pit of my stomach, so I swallowed hard and waited for it to pass.

"Maksimka," Babi said as she crossed the room and took my face in her weathered hands. "It's not fair, I know. Believe me, I know. But in the end, all we have is family and what the family needs, we have to give. In the

end, the sacrifice is worth it. And no matter what you think, you have to know that your Papa loves you and Kristov more than anything on earth. He will do everything in his power to protect you and make sure you live well."

"So, I owe him my loyalty," I muttered as I looked away. Seconds later, I felt the sting of Babi's hand as she pulled back and slapped me hard across the face.

"Don't you ever mock your father's loyalty," she warned in a stern voice. "This is not a game, Maksim, this is our life. You are part of the *vore y zakone* whether you like it or not, and I will not have you disrespecting it."

"I'm sorry, Babi," I said as I suppressed the urge to bring my hand to my face and feel the cheek where she'd delivered the blow. I knew then that my only way was to get onboard as best I could and then look for an out when the time came. Babi might love me, but she wasn't going to be my advocate in my attempt to free myself from my father.

"Just do what is best for the family, Maksimka," she said as she leaned down and kissed my still stinging cheek. "Always the family."

I nodded as I began to plot my way out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lexi

I sat on the floor in front of the door sobbing until I was exhausted, then I pulled my phone off of the table and called my best friend, Viv. She assured me that she would be there within the hour and that she'd bring the necessary supplies. I hung up, staring at the picture of Josh and me in Jamaica that had been my screen saver since we'd taken the photo six months ago. We'd scraped together our meager earnings and bought a cheap weekend package to celebrate graduation and our relationship surviving our undergrad years. It had been a magical weekend, and I'd wondered if Josh was going to propose. He hadn't, of course, but it felt like we'd solidified our partnership and were walking in the same direction on the same path.

Viv showed up with her arms full of bags of food and various little distractions she'd picked up along the way. Once through the door, she

dropped the bags and pulled me into a tight hug, which immediately made me start crying.

"There, there," she said as she patted my head and rubbed my back. I clung to her as my tears fell fast and furious on her shoulder. She smelled like clean linen and sunshine, and the scent catapulted me back to the warmth of the sandy beach where Josh and I had spent hours talking about the future.

"I...I...I..." I stammered through sobs. I wanted to tell her what I was thinking. I wanted to spill out all of the horrible, awful thoughts that were racing through my brain so I could let them go and forget that Josh had simply abandoned me. I felt sorry for myself. I wanted to curl up in a ball and hide in bed for the rest of eternity, but Viv would have none of it.

"I know, Wally," she reassured me. She had nicknamed me Wally during our first year in high school and contrary to popular belief, it wasn't a shortened version of Wallace, which happened to be my last name.

It was because of the time I'd been talking nonstop about some boy I had a crush on, had failed to look where I was going and had walked face first into a brick wall. It took me a long time to accept the nickname, but she finally sold me on it when she told me that my ability to focus on one thing and tune out everything else around me was one of the things she admired

most about me – even when it resulted in embarrassing situations. "I know it hurts. I know he's an ass. I know. I know. Just let it all go."

As I cried, I noticed that one of Viv's bags was making a quiet rustling noise, and I picked my head up off of her shoulder to look at it more closely. She let go and stepped back to examine the bag. It looked like something was trying to escape. I turned and gave Viv a quizzical look.

"Open it up, Wally!" she urged. So, I reached out and pulled the edges of the bag apart and found myself face to face with a tiny gray kitten who stared at me with its big blue eyes before reaching out and softly patting my nose.

"What is this?" I asked as I looked back and forth between Viv and the tiny cat.

"I believe it's what most people call a kitten," she grinned.

"Is it yours?"

"Nope, it's yours!" she declared as she clapped and bounced up and down.

"I can't have a kitten!" I protested. "How in the world can you bring me a kitten and think that it makes up for Josh walking out?"

"I didn't bring her to replace Josh," she said in an indignant tone, and then backed up a bit. "Well, maybe she's a little bit of a replacement for that lousy excuse for a human being, but I brought her mostly because she needs

a home and I'd already adopted two of her littermates. I can't have three cats in my apartment."

"So, you just brought her here and thought I'd take her no questions asked?" I said as I stared down into the bag at the tiny little kitten who sat quietly looking up at me.

"Pretty much."

"Vivian Lasky, you are beyond the pale!" I yelled and then felt bad as the kitten ducked her head and hid in the corner of the bag.

"You're scaring the baby!" she shot back as she reached into the bag and pulled out the little gray fuzz ball and cooed, "Are you okay, baby? Are you scared of the big, bad lady? Don't be scared, little one."

"Great, this is just great, Viv," I said as I watched her snuggle the kitten. "I don't even know if I'm allowed to have pets or if I'm even going to have a place to live!"

"Don't be dramatic," she said. "Of course, you're going to have a place to live."

"Josh isn't going to pay his portion of the rent, Viv!" I cried. "He said he has a lot of expenses to take care of in LA and that he'd send me money if he could, but that I really shouldn't expect anything. He stuck me with this place and now I've got a \$1,600 a month rent payment for the next eight months and no job!"

"Well, that's easy to remedy," she said as she held the kitten out to me. "Here, snuggle her while I get dinner ready."

Reluctantly, I took the kitten from her and cradled it like a baby. She curled up in my arms, content to watch Viv pulling containers out of bags and piling food on the plates she pulled out of the cupboard. I stroked the kitten's tiny head and was rewarded with a loud purr and a big drop of saliva on my arm.

"Oh gross," I said trying to feign disgust so that I wouldn't fall in love with this tiny creature. "She's drooling."

"Yep, that's what kittens do when they're super happy," Viv smiled. "She likes you."

"Well, she shouldn't get too comfortable. She's not staying," I grumbled.

"Wally, don't be such a damn miser," she said as she spooned a healthy helping of tabouleh onto our plates. "Just because Josh is a loser doesn't mean you need to shut down and cut off all other outlets. Besides, this shouldn't be all that surprising. We knew he was an ass from the beginning. Hell, we used to joke about it before you went and got all lovey-dovey about him."

"Why are you rubbing salt into the wound?" I asked as I ran my fingers up and down the soft gray fur and watched as the kitten slowly grew sleepier and sleepier.

"Because you are a romantic dreamer and I am a pragmatist, my friend," she said, pulling open a drawer and cheering a little when she found the forks on the first try. Viv was smart, but she didn't have a mind for details. "We knew this was going to happen eventually. Just be glad it was before you got married and were saddled with kids."

"Yeah, now I'm just saddled with a kitten," I muttered.

"Gratitude is an attitude, Wally," Viv chirped. I wanted to smack her and she knew it, so she flashed a big brilliant smile as she set the full plate of food down in front of me with a flourish. "Eat. You need to keep your strength and blood sugar up."

I held the sleeping kitten in one arm as I dug into the enormous plate of food that Viv had set before me. It was a little awkward trying to pull the shish kabob off of the skewer with one hand, but I didn't want to wake the warm, fuzzy kitten who seemed to have gotten very comfortable very quickly. As she purred softly in my arms, I knew she would be staying and I silently cursed and blessed Viv for the gift.

"So, what are you going to do about rent, Wally?" Viv asked after we'd gorged ourselves on hummus, fresh pita, salad, and grilled meat. "You've got another mouth to feed now. You have to be a responsible parent."

"Very funny, Viv," I said with a grim smile. "I have no idea what I'm going to do. Josh and I were splitting the rent and I was barely scraping by."

I need something, and I need it fast!"

"Well, first thing's first," she said in a bossy tone. "You need to get down to the office and talk with Peter about acting jobs. Then, you need to register with the temp agency in my building. I might be able to convince my boss to call and ask for you, if we've got any good work. Then, we need to see about what other options you might have."

"Viv, I'm registered with every temp agency in town," I told her as I scooped up the last of the hummus with a bit of pita and popped it in my mouth. "There hasn't been much for months."

"Hmmm, okay," she mused as she wracked her brain for something that might be useful. "Oooh, I've got it! How about modeling? There's a bunch of trade shows coming through town in the next few months! You could be a spokes-model for some of the companies that show their goods at the convention!"

"I'm an actress, not a model, Viv," I reminded her. "How on earth am I going to get a modeling contract for those shows?"

"I think I know someone," she said with a grin.

"Of course, you do." I rolled my eyes and looked down at the bundle of fur curled up in my arms and felt a strong wave of love flood my brain as I looked at her. "Anna. I'm going to call you Anna Karenina."

"What did you say?" Viv asked as she scrolled through her enormous list of contacts, looking for the one that would connect me to the trade show modeling business.

"Nothing, I just named the kitty," I said quietly as I leaned down and kissed the top of the fuzzy, little, gray head and whispered, "It's all going to be okay, Anna. We're going to be fine, you and me." The kitten purred loudly as she stretched her paws up and found a more comfortable position, and for the first time since Josh walked out the door, I smiled.

CHAPTER FIVE

Max

On my way back downtown after visiting Babi, my phone rang and; and when I looked at the screen, I sighed and answered. "What do you want?"

"Is that any way to greet your friend?" the woman on the other end purred.

"Natalia, I don't have a lot of time for nonsense," I said a little more harshly than I'd intended. "What do you want?"

"Aww, don't be mad, Maxi," she pouted. "Why are you mad at me? What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing, Natalia," I said through clenched teeth. The cab was slowly moving down Wabash and I was irritated by the traffic, so I tapped on the window, handed the driver a twenty, and motioned for him to pull over. I

got out and began walking toward the office at a rapid pace. "What do you want?"

"Will you go see the Ibsen play with me this weekend?"

"Again?" I replied. "You know how much I hate that play, and yet you ask me to go with you not once, but twice. Why, Natalia?"

"Because I want to see it again, darling!" she replied and then dropped her voice to a husky whisper and said, "I'll make it worth your while, Maxi. You know how I love to do that for you when you do me a favor, don't you?"

Almost against my will, I could feel the blood rushing away from my brain toward my groin. Natalia had a way of turning everything into a sexual seduction, and while I wasn't in love with her, I couldn't resist her considerable skills and enthusiasm. She was a gorgeous woman. From her glossy black bob to her ruby red lips to her hourglass figure, she radiated an aura of sexual power that drew men to her in droves. She loved nothing more than to catch and release them, but she always came back to me when she needed to ground herself in something real. We were friends, but both of us knew it would never be more than that.

"Nat, what are you doing?" I said as I swallowed hard.

"Oh, you know perfectly well what I'm doing," she purred softly as my pants became incredibly tight. "You love it when I take charge and tell you

what I want, don't you, Maxi?"

"Jesus, woman," I groaned. "Fine, I'll go to the damn play with you! Just stop these obscene phone calls! I've got a business to run!"

"Mmmm, you know you love it," she laughed. "I'll get the tickets, you meet me at the theater at seven sharp on Saturday. Oh, and Max?"

"Yes?"

"Wear something that I can quickly remove," she said. "And, I'll do the same."

"Natalia!" I yelled as she laughed loudly before disconnecting.

I turned the corner on Wabash and quickly walked to the store entrance. I'd rented this place when I'd decided to sell the jewelry that I'd seen during my travels to the Far East. For a long time, I'd wanted to bring together the Asian influences in fine jewelry with the Russian expertise in mental work, and when I'd run across a factory on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg that could not only replicate Faberge-style items, but also manufacture entirely new items, I'd signed a contract with them and vowed to get the business up and running within six months.

That was four months ago, and now I was looking at launching my new line at the trade show in two weeks. I needed to hit the ground running and score a couple of big clients in order to ensure that my investment would continue to pay off. I knew that landing the big clients would not be easy in

a city where there was an entire block devoted to high, medium, and low end jewelry, and being the new guy in town made my position even more precarious. No one had ever heard of me, and if they had, they probably wanted to do business with my father rather than me.

I opened the door, entered the shop, and looked around. It was a small place, but I'd done some renovations to make it look shiny and new. I'd put in plush carpeting in a soft shade of gray and had the electrician install new lighting that hung lower and reflected in a way that made the metal and stones sparkle at any angle. I'd polished the jewelry cases to a shine and they were ready to house the gorgeous gems I'd purchased and imported.

My office was in the back and had been sparsely furnished with a desk, chair, and a conference table for any private business that needed to be done away from the sales floor. I had a thin laptop computer that I took everywhere with me so that I could monitor the business no matter where I was, and now all I needed was an employee to help me sell the jewels.

I'd thought long and hard about whom I would hire, and I'd decided that it needed to be a woman. I needed balance in the store, and a woman would provide just the right image and give me the opportunity to serve my clients in the way that was most comfortable for them. Sometimes a woman's touch was needed in order to close a sale or encourage an additional purchase, and

I was no fool when it came to ensuring that my business had every possible opportunity to succeed.

The question was where to find a qualified, knowledgeable, and attractive woman who could do all of the things I was asking of her. I'd tried ads in the paper and through the local gemological society, but so far, they'd not produced any viable candidates. I was going to have to find someone fast if I wanted to have any hope of turning this business into a success.

I went back to my office and began scanning the list of temp agencies in the area, hoping that maybe one of them could provide me with a suitable employee.

"Dammit, I'm going to make this work," I swore under my breath as I reached for the phone and dialed the first number on the screen.

CHAPTER SIX

Lexi

The next morning, I woke up early when Anna pounced my face and demanded breakfast. "You're going to be my new alarm clock, aren't you?" I laughed as I stroked her head until she rewarded me with a purr. Anna meowed in agreement and then hopped down off the bed and padded to the door, looking back over her shoulder to make sure I got the message that she was hungry.

"Fine, fine, fine," I said as I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. I called out toward the bathroom, "Josh, did you make coffee yet?" and then bit my tongue hard as I sat back down on the bed remembering that Josh was no longer here. I tried to wipe away the tears as they flowed fast and hot down my cheeks, but the memories flooded my brain and before I knew it, I was curled in a ball on the bed, sobbing.

"Mrrow?" Anna chirped as she hopped back up onto the bed and began rubbing her head against my arm. When she didn't get the response she wanted, she began butting her head against my hands and trying to move them away from my face as she chirped louder. Her meows became louder and more distressed until I was forced to pull my hands away to look at her. She sat in front of me, staring at me with wide blue eyes, and then reached out and patted my face before she began head butting me again.

"Okay, okay," I said as I choked back the sobs that still sat in my throat. "I'll get up and feed you. Just understand that you're here because of a breakup and it's going to take some time to get over it. Got it?"

"Meow!" she replied as she hopped off the bed and headed back to the doorway. This time, she sat down and waited until she was sure I was following her before prancing happily to the kitchen and chirping as I poured food into her bowl.

"Happy now?" I asked and got a loud purr in response. I pulled out the coffee and started making a pot. I was halfway through my morning ritual before I realized that I'd made enough coffee for two and that made me start crying again. I knew that this was a normal response to what had happened not twenty-four hours before, but I also felt a little panicked about the fact that if I couldn't pull myself together, and do it quickly, I wasn't going to be

able to land a job. And, if I didn't land a job, Anna and I would be out on the street with no place to go.

"I'm not going to let him keep me from doing what I need to do," I muttered as I poured myself a cup of hot coffee and walked over to the computer to check the job listings. I felt my stomach turn over when I saw the spot where the computer usually sat empty and then realized that Josh had taken our shared laptop. "Son of a bitch! That does it!"

The computer had been a gift from my parents when I'd gotten into Northwestern. It was old and slow, but it was mine, and Josh taking it with him made something in me snap. I might have loved him, but he had been an extraordinarily selfish person who took care of his own needs – rarely mine. I'd stayed with him because it was familiar and comfortable and, if I was honest, because I was afraid of being alone. Josh didn't take care of me, *per se*, but he did take care of everything that affected *him*, and he was a control freak, which meant I never had to plan anything. I'd always chalked it up to his quirky sense of responsibility, but as I sipped my coffee, I started to see how this was really an indication of his deep-seated narcissism.

I'd cooked meals for us, but he'd done all the shopping and decided what we'd eat and when. I'd done the laundry, but he'd decided what detergent we'd use and how the clothes would be cared for. I'd paid my

share of bills, but he'd held the checkbook and all the passwords to our accounts.

"Oh God, Anna! He has all the passwords to the accounts! I have no money!" I groaned as I realized that without Josh, I was pretty much destitute. The tears began to well up, but before they fell, I sternly told myself that I was not going to fall to pieces. I was not going to crumble and become a sobbing mess because I was strong and capable and...

"Fuck!" I shouted as I slammed my fist on the counter spilling coffee and causing Anna to jump and run behind the couch. When she peeked around the corner, I smiled at her and said, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm just mad and a little scared."

"Purrrt?" she chirped as she head butted the couch and cautiously approached me. I reached out and scooped her up, bringing her to my chin where I snuggled her and kissed her fuzzy little head.

"Indeed," I said as she purred happily. "I'm going to make this work, Anna. You're not going to be out on the street or in some shelter. We're going to keep this place. I just need to figure out a way to do it."

As I stood at the counter holding the kitten and sipping coffee, my phone rang and when I answered it, I heard a familiar voice shouting, "Kid! I got a role for you! Can you come to the office today?"

"Hello, Peter," I laughed. "What's up?"

"I just told you," he shouted. Peter Baxter had been my agent for the past six years, and while he was great at being an agent, he wasn't so good at mastering the finer points of technology. I had gotten used to him shouting into the phone after several lessons on cell phone etiquette had gone nowhere. "I got a role for you, and I need you to come to the office to pick up the information and get the rundown on what the client wants."

"What is it?" I asked as Anna licked my chin and made me giggle.

"What's going on? Why are you giggling?" he yelled.

"It's a kitten, Peter," I said as I kissed Anna on her tiny little nose and then set her down on the floor.

"A what?" he shouted. "Why is a mitten making you laugh? I don't understand you kids these days. Weird things are going on."

"Peter, just tell me what the role is," I said as I fought back a bubble of laughter. His hearing wasn't the best even on good days, and the phone presented a whole other series of challenges. Most of the time, I found it entertaining, and since he was one of the best agents in Chicago, I let it go and tried to only have conversations with him face-to-face.

"I can't, you gotta come into the office, kid," he said sounding distracted. "What time can you get here?"

"An hour?" I offered.

"Can you be here in an hour?" he repeated. "An hour would be good."

"Yes, Peter, I'll be there in an hour!" I shouted into the phone.

"Good!" he yelled back and then added, "Hey, why the hell are you shouting at me?"

I burst into laughter and was only able to say, "Bye, Peter!" before hanging up and heading into the bathroom to shower and get ready for an audition for a mystery part.

"I'm going to do this, Anna," I told the tiny kitten. She chirped as she batted around a dust bunny that she'd pulled from under the couch. I smiled at her antics as I said, "I'll get the part and then I'm going to clean this place."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Max

"Dammit!" I cursed as I slammed the phone down for the third time. There wasn't a temp agency in town that could find me an employee who could fulfill my sales needs, and I was running out of time and patience. "This is utter bullshit! How can they not have someone who can sell jewelry on their staff?"

I sat staring at the picture of my mother I'd hung over the doorway. I'd hung the picture when I'd first bought the shop, and now, I wondered what she would say about this venture and what she would advise me to do. I thought about it for long time before I got up from my desk and walked out to the front of the store. I stood staring at the sales floor as I thought about how to go about getting what I needed. My mother had been a resourceful person, and she would have told me that if I couldn't get a real salesperson,

then I simply needed someone who could play the role of a salesperson – at least, until I could hire someone who actually knew what she was doing. I needed someone who could act the part convincingly.

"Hell, I'm sure this city is full of out-of-work actors!" I said smacking my hand down on a case. I quickly walked back to my office and did a search for talent agents in Chicago. The first name that came up was Acting Aces, a company that had its offices a few blocks from the shop and listed a number of well-known Chicago actors among its clients. I dialed the number and waited.

"Acting Aces, where we make stars out of everyone! This is Gina, how may I direct your call?" an enthusiastic voice said.

"Mr. Peter Baxter, please," I said.

"Who may I tell him is calling?" she asked.

"A client who has a desperate need for an actor and is willing to pay whatever it costs to find one," I said in an even tone.

"Oooh, he'll love that! Hold on a sec, hon!" she squealed before putting me on hold and transferring the call.

I listened to Frank Sinatra croon about wanting to be flown to the stars as I waited for the agent to pick up. It took several minutes, and by that time, I was questioning my choice of agencies.

"Peter Baxter here!" the man shouted as he picked up the line. "What kind of actor do you need?"

"Hello, Mr. Baxter," I said taken aback that he hadn't asked for any credentials, or even my name, for that matter. "I'm Max Malinchenko, I'm looking for an actor to help me open my new jewelry store."

"You a Russian?" Mr. Baxter demanded.

"Yes, my family is from Moscow originally," I replied.

"You any relation to a Vladimir Malinchenko over on the South Side?" Mr. Baxter bluntly asked. I was taken aback because I hadn't thought about how deeply my father's connections might run and that I might not want to have the family name associated with my business.

"He's my father," I admitted.

"Yeah, well, you might want to lop off the 'chenko' part of your name if you're looking to start a business, son," Baxter said.

"Mr. Baxter, while I appreciate your attempt to advise me on how to name my business, I did not call you for that purpose," I said in a stern tone, hoping to get him back to the conversation about finding an actor.

"Hey, don't get all pissy with me, son," he said. "I'm just telling you that your pop is a known mafia man and if you are looking to start a legitimate business, then you'd better make some adjustments, so you don't get lumped in with the riff raft."

"Mr. Baxter, my father is a businessman and he runs a number of legitimate businesses, and I resent your accusations," I said as I felt my blood began to boil. My father might be a mafia leader and a dangerous man, but that didn't give a perfect stranger the right to say these things about him to his son. "If you want my business, I suggest you change your approach."

"Jesus, son, I've lived in Chicago my whole life, which is probably a hell of a lot longer than you've been alive," Baxter shouted into the phone. "Get off your high horse and take my advice or don't, but I'm not going to send one of my actors into a situation that I know is going to be dangerous if you're associated with a Russian mafia leader!"

"Touché, Mr. Baxter," I said finally understanding that he wasn't a nosy, old man, but a shrewd businessman who was invested in keeping his people safe on the job. "I wasn't thinking of it that way. I'll give your suggestion some serious thought."

"Good, now what do you need?" he yelled. "What kind of actor do you need? Tall, short, fat, thin, blonde, brunette?"

"How did you know I needed a woman?" I asked. "And why are you yelling at me?"

"It's my damn job to know, son!" he yelled. "And, who's yelling? I'm just trying to speak clearly over this damn line!"

"Very well," I yelled back. "I need an attractive woman who can act like a jewelry salesperson for a couple of weeks. Someone smart and a quick learner."

"Why are you yelling at me?" he shouted. "I can hear you just fine, dammit!"

"Sorry, I need a young woman actor who can play a jewelry salesperson," I repeated.

"I heard you the first time! I'm just looking through my files to see who've I've got available!" he yelled. "No, no, no, that one's out of town, hmmm, this one might work. Yeah, I think I've got one for you, Mr. Malinchenko!"

"Just one?" I asked dubiously. This guy didn't seem to have a large stable of actors if he could only come up with one for me to interview. I sighed as I resigned myself to having to call multiple agencies and have this conversation multiple times over the course of the day.

"One is all you'll need," he shouted. "She's a great one. Smart, pretty, but not too pretty, you know. She's a character actress, so she's used to playing a wide range of roles, and she's got a mind like a steel trap, I tell you. Straight As and can memorize any script in under forty-eight hours. I think you'll like her."

"Sounds promising," I said as he piqued my interest with the description. I tried not to get my hopes up, knowing that it would be unlikely that I'd strike gold on the first try.

"I'll call her and get here over here today," Baxter assured me. "What time do you want her at your place for the interview?"

"You'll send her to my store?" I asked.

"Hell yeah, they're all used to going out on audition calls. How the hell else do you think you're going to know if she works?" he shot back.

"Good point," I agreed. "I'm at 5 South Wabash in the Loop. The store isn't open yet, so please give her my phone number and tell her to call me when she's on her way. I don't want to have to wait around all day for her to show up."

"Hey, my people are professionals, son," he yelled. "If I say they're going to show up at a specific time, they do!"

"No offense intended, Mr. Baxter," I said as I wondered what I was getting myself into and whether it was worth it or not. Baxter had moved on.

"What's your phone number, son?" he shouted. I gave it to him, and he replied, "I'll call you back and let you know when she'll be there."

As I hung up, I sighed and looked up at the picture of my mother hanging on the wall and said, "I hope this turns out all right."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lexi

I showed up at Peter's office an hour and a half after he'd called. I had no idea where Peter was planning to send me for an audition, so I'd chosen to dress professionally, and had picked out an emerald green blouse that softly draped low enough to be sexy, but not so low that I looked slutty. I'd paired it with a black pencil skirt that had a moderate slit up the back and a pair of black pumps that were high enough to make my legs look longer than they really were, but were still functional for walking on city streets. I'd put my hair up in a loose French twist and gone easy on the cosmetics so that I looked fresh and natural.

"Kid, you look dynamite!" Peter crowed when he saw me. He wrapped me in a big hug and asked how I was doing.

"I'm okay," I said hesitating. I didn't want to spill the Josh-saga and end up crying before he sent me out on an audition.

"You know, that McClean was an ass, kiddo," he said unexpectedly. "I'm glad you dumped him and moved on. You deserve someone much better than that two-bit hustler who can't act his way out of a wet paper bag."

"Peter!" I exclaimed as I began laughing. Somehow hearing Josh described this way by someone in the business took a bit of the sting out of him dumping me. "How did you know?"

"Aw, kid, don't you know by now that I know everything about everyone in this business?" he bellowed. "It's how I've stayed in business for as long as I have! Besides, that punk of a manager of his called and asked if I knew of other actors in LA who might need a roommate.

Apparently, your boy didn't have a solid plan once he got to the city. What an idiot."

"Peter, you're the best," I said shooting him a grateful look. Even if he was making up a story, which he often did, it was a good one and it soothed my bruised ego. "Where do you want me to go?"

"Kid, I've got an odd job for you, but you're the only one I thought could play the part," he said as he looked at the paperwork on his desk.

"I've got a guy who needs someone to play the part of a jewelry salesperson for a few weeks, and I think you'd be a hit in the role!"

"Wait, you're asking me to work retail?" I narrowed my eyes. "I don't like the way this sounds, Peter."

"No, I'm not asking you to work retail," he said and then stopped to rethink. "Okay, yeah, I'm asking you to work retail, but it's more of an acting job than a sales job. You need to play the role of a smart, sexy sales clerk in an upscale jewelry boutique while the owner searches for someone who actually knows what they're doing."

"Peter, this makes no sense!" I cried. "This isn't acting! It's just another way of putting me in a job that sucks by telling me it's an acting role. You're selling me false goods, my friend."

"No, actually I'm not, kiddo," he smiled. "I know what it looks like, but what if I tell you that the wages for this particular job are one thousand a week? Does that interest you?"

"Wait, what?" I said doing a double take. "One thousand a week? One zero zero zero, per week?"

"Yep, one thousand a week," he grinned.

"For playing the role of a sales clerk?" I asked.

"Yep, that's it," he nodded.

"Wait, what do I have to do after hours?" I asked suspiciously. "I smell some kind of shady activity going on here."

"You don't have to do anything after hours that you don't want to," Peter said calmly. "It's literally going in and playing the part from eight to five every day and then going home. There are no tricks or hidden catch."

"Who the hell is this guy who needs to hire an actress for this job? Why can't he hire a real salesperson?" I asked. "There have to be thousands of them around town, and for those wages, he'll be able to hire the best of the best!"

"He needs someone immediately and none of the candidates he's interviewed have met his requirements on all levels," he said. "Now, he just needs someone to fill in the gaps while he takes the time to find the right person. Look, it's an easy job, do you want to audition or not?"

"Sure, I definitely want to audition, but you understand why I'm a little skeptical, don't you?" I wondered what the employer was like. Was he particularly unattractive? Is that why he couldn't be out on the sales floor himself? Did he have some kind of disease that wouldn't let him come in contact with the public? "Who is this guy?"

"He's a Russian, and he's got a new store over on Wabash. It's not open yet, so you'll have to help him get it ready for the opening," Peter warned.

"What's wrong with him?" I blurted out.

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong with him," he said, but I got the feeling that Peter wasn't telling me the whole story. He often left out the more unsavory parts of the story when he really wanted someone to take a job.

"If I get there and find out that you've sold me into sexual slavery so that you could collect an agent's fee, I swear I'm going to find a way to escape and come back to get you, Peter," I told him in an ominous voice.

"Oh, get over the dramatics, will you?" he waved me off. "It's a straightforward job with a hefty paycheck and good hours. Take it. You won't be sorry."

"Fine, where do I report for my interview, er, audition?" I asked. Peter gave me the address along with the man's name and cell number.

"He said that you are to call him when you're on your way so that he can make sure he's at the store," he warned. "So make sure you call!"

"Yes, sir," I said as I mock saluted before tucking the paper in my briefcase and heading out the door. I turned and looked back, and quietly said, "Thanks, Peter. I mean, for...you know."

"Aw, go on, kid," he shooed me away without looking up. "Go land the job and make me proud!"

I turned and headed out the door toward the elevator, hoping that I wasn't making a serious mistake.

CHAPTER NINE

Max

After my phone call with Peter, I hopped in a cab and headed over to the Wicker Park to meet my father for lunch. I knew this was going to be a tense conversation, but after talking with Babi, I also knew that the longer I put it off, the worse it would be. I normally used a car and driver in Chicago, but I also knew that my car was regularly followed by a variety of friends and enemies, and this time, I didn't want anyone to know I was visiting my father.

My father, Vladimir Malinchenko, had been an undercover agent for the KGB during the '70s and '80s. He'd spent time gathering information in East Germany and then had disappeared for a few years, or at least, that's what Babi had told me. I could never get my father to talk about that time, so I'd always assumed that he'd been on a secret mission, but as I got older,

I learned to read the tattoos of the men who were *vore y zakone* and realized that my father was part of an underground group of men who fought to uphold the old traditions of the *bratán*.

When I was nine and my brother was twelve, my father came home one afternoon and told my mother to pack our suitcases. She refused to do it at first, crying and pleading with him not to do this to our family. He held his ground and warned her that if she didn't obey, he'd make her sorry that she hadn't. I didn't understand what was going on. My father had always been a tough man, but he'd never once hit or even threatened my mother; in fact, he'd been the man that all the other husbands on our block complained about setting too high a standard. He might go to the bar and get stinking drunk with his friends on Saturday night, but he never once failed to bring my mother flowers for her birthday or a holiday and he always came home in time for dinner with the family. He was a hard man, but a fair one.

My mother finally gave in and packed our bags, and by the next morning, we were on a train that was heading out of St. Petersburg toward Finland. My father didn't say much on the train ride, but my mother cried the entire trip. Once we arrived in Helsinki, my mother stopped crying and she and my father took us to the American Embassy and asked for asylum. Given the fact that my father had been a member of the KGB for over two

decades, the American government was happy to grant him anything he wanted in exchange for information about the operation.

For two months, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment near the embassy while my father told them everything he could remember about his time in the KGB. I remember going to school with Finnish kids and not understanding a word they were saying. I tried to make friends with a boy who was bilingual, but his classmates teased him until he shrugged and walked away. I pulled inward and tried to be as invisible as possible.

Kristov, however, did the opposite, and he was soon suspended from school for fighting with the other boys over a soccer ball. My mother kept us home after that, and soon after, we were put on a plane heading for Chicago.

"Sir?" The taxi driver had stopped in front of the address I'd given him and was waiting for me to get out. "Sir, we're here."

"Huh?" I shook my head to clear it and then looked out the window. "Oh, yeah. Thanks."

I exited the car and walked up to the front door of my father's bar. The sign over the door read "Ursus" and had a ferocious brown bear with sharp fangs and claws carved into the wood above the bar's name. I shivered a little as I pulled the door open and entered. Inside, the place smelled of beer and cigars, and there was a sad Russian love song playing on the overhead speakers. The interior looked a lot like Babi's apartment. It was heavy, dark

oak and walnut carved with intricate, traditional designs. The bar ran across one entire wall and had every brand of Russian vodka a customer could possibly want, including the stuff that was my father brewed in a homemade distillery contraption made of a washtub and several lengths of pipe.

"Papa?" I called as I moved toward the back. "Papa, are you here?"

"Maksimka!" my father exclaimed as he exited the back room. "You are here! I've been waiting for you all day!"

"Hello, Papa," I said as he grabbed me and hugged me tightly. "It's good to see you."

"Why so formal, Maksimka?" my father asked. "Come, come, I've got lunch ready in the kitchen. Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine," I said as I warily followed him to the kitchen. Years of watching my father operate had made me wary of his overly magnanimous ways, as that was usually when he cut someone off at the knees – and food made everything trickier. "What did you fix, Papa?"

"I made borscht and a good, thick rye bread," he smiled as he grabbed a bowl and began dishing up the deep red soup and stopping to spoon a healthy scoop of sour cream into the middle of the bowl before grabbing the bread knife and hacking off a large slice of warm bread. "Eat! Eat! You're too thin! Why aren't you bigger like your brother? Kristov is strong and healthy! You look weak and hungry."

"Thanks, Papa, you always know how to compliment me, don't you?" I muttered into my spoon. The borscht was fresh and delicious, and I had to admit that if my father knew one thing, it was definitely how to cook a delicious meal. He'd learned this from Babi, and she was proud of the fact that her son knew all the family recipes.

"Oh, don't get your head all twisted up with craziness," my father scolded me. "I'm just worried about you. Your mother would be worried if she saw you right now."

"Babi saw me yesterday and she didn't seem too worried," I said defensively.

"She was, she just didn't say anything," he said as he sat down on a stool across from me and sipped from his ever-present cup of strong, black coffee. "She wondered why you were so thin and worried."

"Papa, cut the crap, you know why I'm worried," I said as I dropped my spoon in the borscht and splattered red juice everywhere. My father grabbed the towel he kept tucked in his belt and wiped up the mess.

"Maksimka, why do you talk to your father like this," he asked with a dangerous glint in his eye. "I'm trying to keep the family business intact, and in order to do that, I need you and your brother to work together."

"But, Papa, I don't think the business needs me," I said. As a child, I'd always done what I was told, and as an adult, I'd kept the habit with very

few objections, but at that moment, I felt strongly about objecting to this particular obligation and I knew it was going to come at a rather high price, but I couldn't stop. "I feel like I could do something more useful for the family if I ran my own shop and created another stream of income."

My father leaned back on his stool and considered me very carefully. He weighed his words before he spoke, but when he did, I felt a chill run down my spine. Papa was a man who knew what other people were thinking, sometimes even before they knew it themselves, and while it made him a powerful businessman, it also made him an extremely dangerous opponent.

"Maksim, you think I run a bad business. You think I'm a *vore v zakone*. You think I'm a bad man," he said giving voice to some of my most private thoughts. The thoughts that I knew I'd be punished for if they ever saw the light of day. He continued, "All of this may be true on some level, but I will tell you this: I have never done a dishonest business deal, I have never hurt anyone who has not hurt me first, and I have never treated anyone badly who didn't deserve it."

"Papa..." I began.

"No, you listen to me, *moj syn*, I have given you everything in my power," he said leaning across the table. "I have given you a life in the U.S., school, money, and I have spent a lifetime building a business that is

successful enough to take care of you, your brother, and both your families when, God willing, you have them. I have never asked for anything in return, but now I am asking."

"But, Papa, I really do think a high-end jewelry store could be yet another income generating business and I have spent a great deal of time researching and coordinating the business," I protested carefully and thoughtfully. If my father suspected that my real reason for starting the business was to distance myself from him and the family, there would be hell to pay. "It seems like a fair tradeoff to let me run the business, don't you think?"

"Fair?" he yelled as he slammed his fist down on the counter. "Fair? What is fair? Is it fair that I had to move my family away from my homeland, away from my city, so that they could have a life that wasn't possible in Moscow? Was it fair that I went from being a highly respected man to someone who runs a bar? Was it fair that I worked long hours and late nights when your mother needed me at home?" He stopped and inhaled sharply to keep from letting his emotions take control.

"No, it wasn't fair," I said softly. "But I think we are heading into a new era of doing business, and we're going to have to modernize or else we're going to suffer. We shouldn't suffer, should we, Papa? The business shouldn't suffer, should it?"

He closed his eyes and raised a large callused hand to his forehead, rubbing it back and forth before he looked at me again. When he did, I saw the years of pain welling up in his eyes, and my father's pain scared me far more than his anger. I knew what happened when he was in pain – and nothing good had ever come of it.

"Maksimka, I loved your mother more than life itself, but nothing I could have done would have saved her. She made her own choices and I had to protect you boys. You know that. Kristov knows that. I know that. The only thing that kept me going was the thought of you and your brother running the business together and carrying on the family tradition. If you don't, then what good was my life? What was my purpose? I'm not a young man anymore. I don't have a lot of time left."

"Papa, don't say that, you're fine," I countered as I searched his face for a sign that what I was saying was true.

"None of us know how much time we have, Maksim," he told me wearily. "The truth is that I'm losing my grip on the young ones. They don't understand the value of the old ways, and I'm too old to bring them to heel, anymore. I need you and Kristov as my captains. I need you to wear your stars so that the young ones will fall in line and do as they're told."

"Papa, I don't have the same kind of force as Kristov does," I said. "I'm not like him. I can't make people do what I want them to do through

violence."

"Don't you think I know that, *moj syn*?" he said shaking his head and smiling. "Kristov is the muscle, but you are the brains. I need you to be the brains of the operation, so that your brother can be the brawn. He is a good boy, but he can't see past his own *zhopy*. I need you to oversee things."

"Papa, I've sunk a lot of money into this shop, and I want to make it successful," I said as I thought about the beautiful gleaming jewels carefully packed in boxes waiting to be unpacked and sold. "I need to add to the business and make it successful so that we can add it to the family income and ensure that we'll be financially solid for a long time. I need to contribute in the best way I know how. Can you understand that?"

"I understand it all too well, Maksim," my father said. "I know what you want. I wanted the same thing before we left Moscow, but the family business is the most important thing and I need you here to run it."

"Papa, can I at least have a few months to try? I've sunk a lot of money into this store and I want to at least recover it," I said as I quickly tried to think of a way that I could have what I wanted without angering my father too much. "Just give me a few months to at least try. If I can't make it successful in that time, then I'll close up shop, sell it all, and come work with Kristov without a complaint."

My father sat staring at me as he considered my request. He sipped from his coffee cup and then leaned forward and spoke. "I'll give you three months to make your first million; if you can't do it by then, you're never going to do it big enough to make it matter. If you can make your first million by then, then we'll talk about how to keep your store open and let you have your little side business. But meanwhile, I want you to keep in contact with your brother and me so that we can keep you up to date on the situation with the family. I've got a shipment coming in the week after next and I need help getting the cargo off the dock. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," I said nodding solemnly. My father's cargo shipments weren't a pretty business, and I knew that my mother had seriously objected to it, but one thing we all understood was that we were never, ever to interfere with my father's business. We were all well aware of the fact that those who did didn't live to tell about it. And, it didn't matter who they were.

"Good, so now that we have that straightened out, how about some of my fresh *vatrushka*? I just made it this afternoon!" he said as he moved toward the counter where the pastry sat. He looked at me expectantly. I nodded and watched as he expertly cut the sweet treat into pieces and served one up. "We're family, Maksimka. We take care of each other."

"I know, Papa," I said as I accepted the plate and with it, the terms of my father's agreement. I now had three months to make this work or I'd be sucked into the seedy underbelly of the Russian mafia for the rest of my life. I took a deep breath and ate my dessert.

CHAPTER TEN

Lexi 10

I called the number on the sheet that Peter had given me as I walked down Wacker toward Madison. No one answered, so I left a message with my number and let the man know I was on my way to the shop. I had no idea who this man was; Peter had told me next to nothing about him, so I imagined he was probably an older guy with a paunch and a bald spot. He needed a pretty young woman to be the face of his shop and help encourage men to buy more expensive pieces.

I had worked retail before, so I knew how the sales process worked, and as I walked I began creating a back-story for my sales character. She would have come from the Chicago suburbs, gone to good Catholic schools and graduated from Northwestern with a degree in Literary Studies. I tried to make the character mirror my own background as much as possible so that I

wouldn't have to remember too many false truths. That was one of the things we'd learned in the acting classes I'd taken with Josh. I inhaled sharply as I remembered that he was gone and then swallowed hard to keep the feelings from boiling up to the surface. I was not going to allow Josh to screw up this opportunity for me.

"Smile and remember that you're playing a role, you don't have to know everything," I muttered under my breath as I crossed over to Madison and followed it toward Wabash. A man in a suit shot me a look as I reminded myself of all the things I needed to do to land the role. I ignored him and kept reciting my character's background. So what if people on the street thought I was crazy. So long as the client thought I was sane and capable to playing the role he wanted me to play, it was all good.

I arrived at the small storefront on Wabash and tapped on the door. The place looked empty, so I knocked a little louder. When no one came to the door, I pulled out my phone and dialed the number Peter had given me again.

"Hello?" the man on the other end said.

"Hello, I'm Lexi," I replied. "Peter Baxter sent me over to meet with you about the job?"

"Oh, right," he said and then went silent.

"Are you in the store?" I asked wondering if the guy was senile or something. He didn't sound that old, and I wondered if he was busy with something else.

"No, unfortunately I'm not there at the present time," he said and again, silence.

"What would you like me to do, then?" I asked.

"Can you wait for me?" he asked. "I'm in a cab on my way back and should be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, of course. I'll wait here."

"Very well," he said and then abruptly disconnected.

"Great," I muttered as I stepped away from the storefront and walked over to the planter near the store and perched on the edge. "He's a geriatric space cadet who can't remember that he asked to have an employee sent over. This is not good, Wallace. Not good at all."

As I sat on the planter waiting for my new boss to show up, I thought about all of the things that this job would make possible. I could pay my rent out of one paycheck and bank the rest as insurance for a few more months. Two paychecks and I'd have rent covered for a while. I could use the other two to pay off my credit card and buy a new laptop. If I was careful, I could invest in some new clothes for the job and buy Anna a cute little kitty condo so that she could entertain herself while I was working. I

was so intent on ringing up all the benefits this job would bring that I didn't notice the man who got out of the cab and approached me.

"Ms. Wallace?" he said. Startled, I fell backwards into the planter. As I lay there wondering what had just happened, a handsome man leaned down and offered me his hand. I took it and as he pulled me up, I gasped. He was so handsome I had to look away for a moment. When I looked back, I inhaled deeply as I studied his face. He had messy, medium-length, dirty blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and an aristocratic nose. As my eyes trailed down his face, I couldn't help but notice his lips – there was a tough sensuality about them, making it almost impossible for me to stop staring. It was an absolutely irrational thought, but I desperately wanted to chew on his bottom lip.

"Ms. Wallace, are you okay?" he asked as I stood looking up at him, mesmerized by his sensual good looks. Not even Josh, the aspiring Hollywood star, was this handsome. What made this man even more handsome was the fact that he seemed absolutely unaware of his intoxicatingly good looks. "Ms. Wallace?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, fine," I stammered as I tried to breathe evenly and focus on what he was saying. "I'm fine, thank you, Mr..." I trailed off as I realized that Peter had only given me his first name and I didn't feel comfortable calling him by it when he was addressing me by my surname.

"Malin," he said as he held out his hand for a handshake. "Max Malin, but you can call me Max."

"Hi, Max," I said as I shook his hand and looked up into his eyes. "I'm, um, Wallace, Lexi Wallace."

I could have kicked myself for my awkwardness, but he just smiled and said, "Would you like to come in and see where you'll be working?"

"Um, sure," I said with a confused look on my face. "I thought this was an audition, Mr., um, Max."

"Oh, you got the job," he said as he unlocked the front door and led me into the front of the store. The cases gleamed in the afternoon sunlight and looked ready to be filled with merchandise.

"I did?" I was stunned that he'd hired me after my back flip into the planter outside. "Why?"

"You're just who I need to help me get this place off the ground and running smoothly," he replied.

"But you don't know anything about me."

"I know everything I need to know." He smiled again and my breath caught in my throat. I berated myself for already having a crush on my new boss.

"What will I be doing?" I asked as I strolled around the small showroom and looked at the cases.

"You'll be out here on the sales floor showing the merchandise to potential clients and selling the jewelry," he said. " Basically, Ms. Wallace, you'll be the face of M. Malin. Do you think you can handle that?"

"Yes," I said swallowing hard and looking back at him. His face was impassive and I couldn't tell if he was happy or not. "But you can call me Lexi."

"Very well then, Lexi, you will be the sales force at M. Malin," he said as he walked to the back and pulled out a small box and handed it to me. "I want you to wear this."

I took the box and carefully opened the lid. Inside I found a solitaire necklace on a thin chain. I gasped and looked up at him. "I can't accept this!"

"You have to," he said grinning. "I need you to wear the merchandise and make it look good."

"So, you're going to pay me an outrageous weekly salary and you're going to make me wear gorgeous jewels in order to better sell them?" I asked.

"That sounds like something I would do," he agreed as he turned and walked to his office. He returned with a laptop and set it on one of the cases. "I'm going to need to get some information from you for tax purposes, so could you fill out these forms and then just hit enter?"

"Of course," I mumbled, still in shock over the unexpected opportunity that had fallen in my lap. I filled out the paperwork, then turned and said, "What's next, boss?"

"Now, I'm going to need you to help me check in the inventory that we'll be putting out tomorrow and the next day," he said as he headed for the back stock room. "Follow me, please."

The jewelry room was a space smaller than Max's office and with the two of us in it, there was no room for me to look away. He began handing me boxes one after the other and I took them and placed them on the counters out in the showroom. Once he'd unloaded all of the merchandise, he led me back out to the showroom and said, "Now, I want you to open each box and check the SKU numbers against the inventory sheet. Once you've checked off every piece of jewelry, come let me know and I'll give you another task. Okay?"

"Okay," I said staring up into his eyes. They were so blue that it was like looking up at the sky on a cloudless day.

"Ms. Wallace? I mean, Lexi?" he said.

"Mmm hmm," I nodded. "I mean, yes? What do you need?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I was just checking to make sure you're okay."

"Oh yeah," I said. "I'm fine. I'm so much more than fine."

"Excellent, then when you're done, come get me from the office and we'll start on the next project," he said as he turned and headed back to his office.

Watching him walk away was an event in and of itself, and I had to tear my eyes away in order to begin counting the boxes. I'd only looked for a moment, but the image stayed with me all afternoon. Working for Max Malin was going to be an interesting experience, indeed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Max

As I gave Lexi instructions about what she was to do, I tried very hard not to stare at the strategically draped fabric of her bright green blouse. She was a sensual woman, and I could feel myself responding to her beauty in a way that confused me. I had always appreciated beautiful women, but unlike my brother, I'd never looked at them as solely for my pleasure. I had been attracted to many women, but although I'd never tell my brother the truth, I'd had sex with very few of them.

One of the reasons was that I'd watched my brother and vowed never to be like him. Kristov had a new woman every night of the week. He would woo them and make them think they were the most important thing in his life just to get what he wanted, and once he did, he discarded them quickly

and moved on. He liked the thrill of the hunt, but once it was over, he was on to the next challenge.

I, on the other hand, liked the challenge, but preferred to actually like the women I had sex with and that took time to figure out. Kristov would mock me for being a wimp or a softie, so I'd learned to brag about my many conquests just to throw him off my scent. The reality was that I liked strong, smart women and they weren't easily fooled by a slick talking, good-looking guy with money. They wanted something more, and I was willing to give that to the right one. And so far, Natalia was the only one who'd managed to hold my interest. I knew she wasn't in love with me, or I with her, but we had a solid friendship and a mutual understanding about how things worked; so far, it had worked perfectly.

So as I sat down at my desk and started going through my email, I reminded myself that Lexi was my employee and that having a crush on her would be highly inappropriate and bad for business. I tucked the memory of the way her skirt curved around and hugged her body away in the back of my brain and tried very hard to focus on the work at hand.

An hour later, Lexi entered my office and said, "I'm done with the check-in, boss! What's next?"

"We need to put everything in its proper tray for display," I said. "Do you have any experience with displays?"

"Nope, not a bit, but if you give me the stuff, I'm sure I could figure it out," she said confidently.

"I'm sure you could, too, but let's cut down on the learning curve," I laughed as I got up and followed her out to the showroom. I swallowed hard as I watched her hips gently swinging from side to side as she walked and I tried not to picture her doing the same thing without any clothes on. It proved impossible and I felt a surge in my groin that I knew I had to tame before she noticed. I conjured up images of dirty dishes in Babi's sink and the smell of the back room in my father's bar. It worked, for the moment, and I was able to stand near her as I showed her how each piece had to be displayed. She nodded as she listened and I felt another rush of desire rip through my veins as a stray lock of hair slipped out of its place and gently floated down to frame her face.

"Do you understand?" I asked as I cleared my throat and tried to ignore the shapely curves of the woman standing a little too close to me.

"I think so," she said looking up at me with her intense brown eyes. "I put the necklaces on these, the earrings on these, and then the rings on these?"

"That's right," I said. "But don't forget the bracelets. They go on these." I held up a small t-stand that had room on it to hang several bracelets.

"Oh, right, sorry, I forgot," she said as she took it from me. Her fingers lightly brushed mine and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through my body. I jumped back and looked at her with surprise. She stared back and asked, "Did I do that?"

"I think it was the carpeting," I told her, despite the fact that I had on leather soled shoes and the carpet was an anti-static brand designed to fight just the thing she thought had happened. "No worries."

I beat a hasty retreat to the back room and sat there wondering how in the world I was going to work with this woman. I'd already altered my last name on the advice of her agent and now realized just what a good idea it had been. The idea for the name of the company had come to me while I was on a buying trip. I thought about all the best jewelry stores and how they had short names that didn't involved the world jewelry. So, I chose the easiest thing I could think of: first initial, last name. And, it seemed to work. The electrician had hung the sign a week before, and now I needed a professional to come in and paint the store name on the front window. I wanted it to look classy, not trashy. I wanted M. Malin to stand out from the other stores on Wabash, and I knew that the sign and my new employee were going to give me the edge.

I also had a feeling that my new employee was going to keep me on edge.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lexi

After I finished my first day at the store, I walked to Michigan Avenue and met Viv for drinks at The Gage. By the time I arrived, she'd secured one of the booths near the bar, had ordered drinks and appetizers for both of us, and had attracted the attention of most of the men at the bar. That was Viv, though.

We'd met in homeroom the first day of our freshman year of high school and had become fast friends. Viv's status as a ginger hadn't made her very popular that year, but as we progressed through high school, she'd figured out how to capitalize on her difference and by the time we graduated, she'd taken to dying her strawberry colored hair bright red and had turned our Catholic school uniform into something that attracted both boys and men. The downside of her independent streak was that she spent

an awful lot of time in detention for minor infractions of the skirt length policy, the blouse policy, and the solid color knee-sock policy. Teachers sighed as they handed her detention slips and Viv would give them a cheeky grin followed by a wink before she took the slip and skipped down the hallway to the room where the perpetually grumpy nun who was responsible for monitoring detention kept watch over the girls who had broken the rules.

"Heya, Wally!" Viv yelled as I walked through the door. "Over here!"

"Do you have to call me Wally in front of everyone in the bar?" I grumbled as I sat down across the table from my friend. She had obviously just been to the stylist because her hair was the brightest shade of cherry red I'd ever seen it. She was wearing her smart-girl glasses and a t-shirt that scooped low and exposed just enough of the tops of her large breasts that I involuntarily brought a hand to my own chest and pulled up my blouse.

"Let your hair down, Lex!" she laughed as she took a sip of the martini in front of her and then grabbed a fried pickle and popped a piece in her mouth. "Live a little! Now, tell me all about the new job."

"What's there to tell?" I shrugged as I sipped the martini Viv had ordered for me and bit into a pickle. I had thought about what I was going to tell her all afternoon as I'd unpacked the beautiful pieces of jewelry and

put them in their proper places. "It's a job selling jewelry in a store over on Wabash."

"Yeah, but what's the boss like?" she asked. "Probably an old guy with a paunch and a bald spot, huh?"

"No, actually..." I trailed off. I wasn't sure I wanted to tell Viv about the attraction I'd felt to my new boss. Somehow, saying it out loud felt like it would make the tension more intense, and I was already concerned about how I was going to manage to maintain a professional distance with Max Malin standing just a few feet away from me. "He's young and kind of hot."

"A hot boss?" she said excitedly leaning across the table. "Do tell!"

"He's just hot," I shrugged, trying not to get caught up in her enthusiasm for details. "He's in his thirties, he's tall, and he has kind of rockstar length hair and these blue eyes that..."

"That what, Lex? His eyes are like what?" She was getting excited and I knew I was perilously close to spilling everything and telling her that I had a massive crush on my boss.

"They're just this shade of blue that reminds me of a cloudless summer sky," I said trying to sound casual.

"Uh oh, you're crushed out, aren't you?"

"No, I'm definitely not!" I protested. It was futile, Viv knew me better than anyone and she definitely knew when I was interested in a guy. "God,

Viv, he's my boss, for crying out loud!"

"Someone's got a crush, someone's got a crush," she sang in a playground voice. I looked down at my drink and thought about it for a moment, then looked up.

"Okay, fine, I have a crush on my new boss! He's hot and he's smart and it's going to make a boring sales job so much more interesting and intriguing," I said, feeling more than a little defensive. "Are you happy now? Happy that I've spilled my guts and told you?"

"Lex, listen to me," she said quietly. "Josh was an ass. I know you're broken up about him dumping you, but seriously, it was for the absolute best. I don't think you should feel guilty about having a crush on your boss. Crush out! Forget that loser who ran off! You are young and beautiful, and you should be enjoying your life, not wallowing in sadness and misery over a guy who wasn't fit to spit on your shoes."

"Jeez, Viv, why don't you tell me how you really feel?" I said with a wry grin. She laughed loudly and signaled the server that we wanted two more drinks. "Hey, take it easy, girlfriend, I've got to work in the morning!"

"Oh please, you've earned a little bit of liquid relaxation," she laughed. "Now, tell me more about the job!"

For the next hour, we went back over every detail of my day and talked about how I should dress in order to shape my character and sell more

merchandise. Viv thought I should show some cleavage.

"Boobs, babe. Boobs sell things," she said and as if on cue, a handsome man from the bar walked over to the table.

"May I buy you ladies a drink and join you for a little conversation?" he asked.

"Why, thank you so much," Viv cooed as she dropped her eyes and then looked up at him and spoke in a soft voice. I'd seen this brush off technique too many times to be wowed by it, but I always enjoyed the way the men responded, so I turned slightly to watch the guy's face. "We appreciate the offer so very much and would love to invite you to join us, but we're celebrating our anniversary and would prefer to do it a deux rather than host a guest. I'm sure you understand, don't you?"

"Oh, uh, wow, oh yeah," he stammered. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Happy anniversary!" The guy turned and quickly walked back to the bar where his friends, who'd witnessed the exchange, pounded him on the back and bought him shots to try and soothe his bruised ego.

"Why do you do that to them, Viv?" I asked as I tried to contain my laughter.

"Because while I love men more than life itself, I think it's healthy for them to live in a world where not all women are theirs for the asking," she

said with a prissy smile. "Besides, we are celebrating together and I didn't want us to have to spend the evening fending off advances from the bar."

"You," I grinned. "You would be fending off advances, not me."

"Oh, get over yourself, Wally," she waved at me. "You're a gorgeous woman with an incredible body and men trip over themselves to get to you. I, on the other hand, am a chubby girl with big boobs and an ass that goes on for days, so I have to use what I've got."

"You underrate yourself, Viv," I said as I sipped the fresh drink the server had placed in front of me.

"Takes on to know one," she grinned as she reached out and took the last pickle. "Now, should we order dinner?"

Viv and I hung out at The Gage talking and drinking until well after midnight. By the time we were done, I'd figured out my wardrobe for the next two weeks and she had not only given me pointers on how to sell more effectively without being overly aggressive, but also a new mascara and two tubes of lipstick.

"Wear the lighter one tomorrow," she advised as she put me in a cab and said goodnight. Then, as the cab pulled away from the curb, she shouted, "And, the wrap dress! Wear the wrap dress!"

I laughed and waved as she disappeared from view.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Max

It had grown dark outside and most of the Wabash Street stores were empty by the time I locked the door and headed for home. I'd dismissed my driver for the night despite his protests; I needed to walk and clear my head. I knew he was concerned about my safety, but I'd changed out of my suit and put on an old pair of jeans, well-worn t-shirt, and an old pair of running shoes before hoisting a backpack over my shoulder. I checked myself in the front mirror and was satisfied to see that I looked like just another Chicago college student.

One thing my father had pounded into our heads as we were growing up was that despite the fact that we had more money than we'd ever know what to do with, we were not allowed to live like the rich. We were clothed and fed well, attended only the best schools, and lived in a beautiful house

in a nice section of Wicker Park, but my father eschewed the luxuries that that Russian government officials had indulged in while their people were starving in the streets, and as a result, he had a love/hate relationship with consumer capitalism. My mother never wore expensive furs or jewelry, but she always dressed well and looked beautiful. My father had warned us over and over to keep a low profile and never ever flout our wealth. As a child, I had no idea how my father spent the money he was making, and as I walked, I recalled the Christmas when I learned never to ask.

I was twelve and Kristov was fifteen, and we had both decided that we wanted an expensive video game console like the ones we saw in the pizza parlor. It was unlike the ones that all the kids in the neighborhood had; it was bigger and better. We lobbied Mama and Babi so that they would be our allies in the push to get Papa to buy it for us. Two weeks before Christmas, we made our move. Papa was in the front room smoking a cigar and watching the news when we approached him and made our case. He listened carefully to all of the reasons we had outlined for why we wanted a gift that had a price tag exceeding our monthly mortgage payment, and then he asked the question that has never left me.

"You boys have a lot of good reasons why you think you deserve this present," he smiled. "But you haven't told me why you want it. Why do you want this gift?"

"Um, so we can play with the technology, Papa," Kristov answered hesitantly. Later, I realized that he was far more adept at reading my father's moods than I would ever be, and this would be the thing that would get me in trouble over and over again.

"Nah uh!" I protested loudly and then blurted out, "We want it so that we'll have a better game system than anyone in the neighborhood and so everyone will be jealous of how great our system is!"

To this day, I still don't know how my father moved so fast, but before I could take another breath, he raised his hand and slapped me across the face so hard that I fell against my brother and knocked him to the ground. As the pain from the explosion that had ripped across one side of my face began to subside, I looked up at my father with tears in my eyes and a surprised look of confusion.

"Don't you ever talk about wanting to be better than anyone else," Papa growled as he leaned over me. He was close enough that I could smell the cigar smoke on his breath and see the rage in his eyes. His voice grew angrier as he delivered his message, "You are never better than anyone else because of what you own or how much money you have! You are human, just like everyone else, and I won't stand for you boys acting like spoiled, American brats! Do you understand me?"

"Y...y...yes, Papa," I whispered, unable to look away. I was terrified of what he would do next and Kristov, sensing that it wasn't wise to be connected to this plan any longer, had extracted himself and now stood over me. He looked at me with disgust before turning and walking away.

"Get up and go do your homework," Papa said as he waved me away. "I don't want to see your face. Go do something useful."

I stood up, turned, and walked out of the room, not making a sound until I was safely behind the closed door of my bedroom. Then, and only then, did I grab my pillow and let out an anguished cry of pain, rage, and powerlessness. I knew that night that my father was a dangerous man, and that if I didn't learn how to tread carefully around him, I would end up like so many other people who had displeased him. From then on, I kept my head down and my mouth shut as I watched and waited for my chance to break free.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts of the past and brought them back to this afternoon's conversation with my father. I felt the pressure of the limited amount of time I had to prove myself closing in on me.

For the first time, I realized that in a real and urgent way my life depended on my ability to make this store a success and that I needed Lexi to play her role perfectly. However, I also knew that there was no way I could let her know how much pressure we were under and I definitely

couldn't let her know why this endeavor was so very important. No outsider could possibly understand the weight my father had placed on my shoulders, and I felt my spirits sagging with the understanding that I'd be carrying this burden all on my own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lexi

The next morning, I woke up with a drooling kitten quietly snoring on my chest. I laughed softly as I petted her and whispered, "Time to rise, sunshine!" I sat up, set her on the pillow beside me, and stretched. Anna shot me an annoyed look and then mushed herself back to sleep on the pillow. I knew she was mad at me for being gone so long the day before, but she was going to have to learn to accept it or we were going to be at odds all the time.

"I'll stop and get you some really fun toys from the pet shop on my way home, little one," I whispered as I bent down and kissed her fuzzy little head. She opened one eye and chirped softly, then buried her face between her paws as she purred contentedly. I laughed, "If I'm not careful, you are going to grow up to be one very spoiled little girl."

I got out of bed and padded to the kitchen to make my first cup of coffee of the day. Even before I looked at the clock, I could tell by the light on the building across the street that the sun was up and that it was going to be another gorgeous day in the city. I thought about what I would wear for my first official day of work and decided on the deep blue wrap dress made of light jersey that clung in all the right places that Viv had talked about the night before. I wanted to impress Max, and if I was honest, I also wanted him to notice me. He hadn't given me the slightest indication that I was anything other than an employee, and while I didn't want to do anything overtly flirtatious, I did want him to notice me. I could hear Viv's voice telling me to go for it, but I pushed it aside by reminding myself that I'd just been dumped by my boyfriend and I didn't need my new boss to be the rebound guy in my life. It would be way too complicated and messy.

"Nope, no dating the boss," I said as I felt Anna winding her way around my ankles and chirping that she was now ready for her breakfast. I quickly poured some kitten food into the little pink bowl that Viv had bought her and watched as Anna happily munched on her breakfast. I poured myself a cup of coffee and flipped on the news.

"In this morning's news, a shoot out on the West Side has left two men dead and two others in critical condition. Wicker Park police say that the shoot out was sparked by a war between two rival Russian mafia factions

who have been under investigation for human and weapons trafficking and drug dealing. When asked how he knew they were Russian, Police Chief Randall Washington said that the tattoos on the deceased's chests and knees indicate that they were captains in their factions and that other tattoos indicated they'd all spent time in prison. There's no word on the identities of the dead men or their specific affiliations. Stay tuned to *Action News* for updates on this story throughout the day."

"It's a violent world out there, Anna," I said as I shook my head and drank the rest of my coffee before picking up the mewling kitten and kissing her nose. "It's a darn good thing I've got a job downtown and not out in those areas, isn't it? A darn good thing!" Anna replied by swatting my nose with her tiny paw and then head butting my chin. I laughed as I set her on the back of the sofa and headed to the bathroom to get ready for work.

An hour later, I was dressed and ready to go. I refilled Anna's food and water and snuggled her once more before I took one more look in the full-length mirror and nodded at my reflection. The blue dress did exactly what I hoped it would do, I'd applied a little blush, mascara, and the light lipstick color that Viv had given me, and pulled my hair up into a loose bun with a wisp or two of hair framing my face. I smiled at myself as I grabbed my briefcase and headed out the door.

Outside, it was sunny and warm as I headed for the El station at Clark and Division. I loved the way I could easily navigate the city by train or bus; it was one of my favorite parts of Chicago living. Once at the station, I realized that I'd forgotten my wallet at home on the dining room table.

"Crap!" I swore under my breath as I headed back out to the street and home to get my wallet. As I was rounding the corner and heading back up Dearborn towards home, a dark car pulled up beside me with its window rolled down. Thinking it was a tourist asking where the new Restoration Hardware store was, I turned and pointed up Dearborn toward Goethe Street and "Restoration Hardware is that way, take a left at the next corner!"

"Ms. Wallace?" I heard a voice call and I spun around to find Max Melin's handsome face looking at me from the open window. A small smile played around the edges of his full lips and I had to force myself to focus on the car's door handle in order to stifle the desire to stare at his lips. Politely, he asked, "Have you already changed your mind about the job?"

"Huh? Oh! No, I forgot my wallet at home and I didn't have any cash for the El," I said flustered by his cool demeanor. "I'll go back and get it, and I'll still be on time, I promise!"

"Ms. Wallace, would you like a ride?" he asked.

"Who? Me?" I replied confused as to why he was in my neighborhood and stunned that he'd offer his new employee a ride to work.

"I don't see anyone else I could be talking to; do you?"

"Um, no," I blushed, knowing that right now, I was acting like an idiot schoolgirl who had a crush on her teacher. I stammered and looked up the block toward my apartment building. "I need to go home first and get my wallet, though, and I don't want to make you late."

"I think the boss will understand the delay, don't you?" he asked again with the hint of a smile playing at the edge of his lips.

"Yes, sir," I said as I looked down and then wondered if I should get in the car or just keep walking.

"Why don't you get in the car and give my driver the address?" he asked as if reading my thoughts. I nodded and walked over to the car and opened the door. When I slid into the backseat, I could smell Max's cologne, a mix of clean freshness with just a hint of musk and it made my pulse begin to race. "Ms. Wallace, the address?"

"Oh, right, 1344 North Dearborn," I told the driver. He nodded and began driving around the block. I looked over at Max and told him, "You can call me Lexi, you know."

"Alright, Lexi." He smiled as he looked at me. His eyes were a cooler shade of blue than I'd first thought, and I was very self-conscious of the fact that I simply couldn't look away from them. "How was your evening?"

"It was nice," I said swallowing hard to keep my breathing even. I used a method we'd learned in acting class and slowly breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth. That calmed my nerves a bit and I told him about dinner and drinks with Viv at The Gage. The driver pulled up in front of my building and I quickly got out calling, "I'll be right back!" as I made a dash for the front door.

Anna chirped happily as I entered the apartment and grabbed my wallet. I warned, "Don't get excited; I'm not staying, little one!" to where she sat in the entryway in front of the door. I stopped for a moment, picked her up, and snuggled her before setting her back down. Satisfied, she chirped and headed for the bedroom. "Silly little girl!" I called as I headed back downstairs.

The drive to work was quick, so the talk was kept to a minimum, but as Max answered his emails, I tried to come up with a topic of conversation that would give me some clue as to who Max Malin was and why in the world he'd hired me to work for him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Max

I kept my eyes on my email and worked at a steady pace as the car carried Lexi and me to the store. I fought against the desire to spend the whole ride looking at her because every time I did, I felt a wave of attraction wash over me and the result made me feel conspicuous. I was her boss, and it was inappropriate for me to see her as a romantic opportunity, but no matter how many times I'd told myself it was out of bounds, I still came back to the fact that she stirred a primal urge in me.

Today, she was dressed in a deep blue wrap dress that clung to her curves and reminded me of why I was extremely glad to be a man. Her hair was again pulled away from her face, giving her an intellectual appearance. I'd always been attracted to smart women, and dressed the way she was,

Lexi definitely looked the part. I had a feeling that when I opened the doors for business, she was going to be one of the biggest assets in the store.

"So, did you see the news about that shooting over on the West side?" she blurted out. "That's some crazy drama, isn't it? It really makes you wonder about what's underlying the whole feud, doesn't it?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked as I tried to maintain a calm exterior. I was now on high alert as the thought that she might be an undercover agent sent to scope me out crossed my mind. There were a lot of people who had been after my father for a lot of years, and while he'd done his best to keep Kristov and me out of the heavier things he was involved in, there were those who knew all about us and would have given their right arms to take one of us down.

"I was just thinking about how a feud like that even gets started," she said as she brushed invisible lint off of her skirt. "Why would people of the same background be out to kill each other? I mean, doesn't it make more sense for them to join forces and present a strong front, rather than offing each other in the streets?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," I replied as I wracked my brain for a way to turn the conversation away from this topic. I had no desire to talk about Russian mafia gang history with Lexi.

"It just seems like this is a lot like the same thing that happened on the West side in the 1970s with the Vice Lords," she offered. "They started out trying to tie the neighborhood together and strengthen the community, and for a while they succeeded, but then someone got greedy and power hungry and the whole structure fell to pieces."

"You seem to know a lot about Chicago," I commented.

"I minored in history, and as part of the program, we had to take two semesters of Chicago history," she said cheerfully. "They were really great classes. I felt like I had a much better understanding of the city and how it came to be once I'd completed them."

"I'll bet," I nodded. "Where did you go to school?"

"Northwestern," she replied.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

"I did, very much," she sighed. "I miss it sometimes, you know? I miss the whole feeling of being in a place where learning is going on and feeling like you're part of it. I miss the community and the security of being a student, even though I was dirt poor the whole time I was there. There's something noble about poor students and starving artists."

"There's nothing noble about poverty unless you're privileged enough to be able to reject it as you claim it," I shot back in an annoyed tone.

"I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" she asked genuinely surprised at my strong response.

"No, I just get sick of hearing rich college students say that they love being poor, when they don't have the first clue as to what that actually means," I said, failing to work my way to more even ground in the conversation.

"Just because you think that all college students are rich kids, doesn't actually make it true, you know," she replied in a bristled tone as she sat up straight and looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"I wasn't saying that all American college students were rich kids," I retorted. "I was saying I was sick of the rich ones saying they were poor when they aren't, in fact, poor!"

"Well, I didn't grow up rich!" she yelled.

"I didn't say you did!" I shot back.

"Well...good," she said as she backed off a little and held my gaze.

I could feel my pulse racing and I knew it wasn't just because we were irritated with each other. As I looked at her, I had the strongest urge to reach over and pull her to me so I could kiss her. I wanted to run my fingers through her shiny, chestnut tresses and feel those full lips pressed against mine. And, I really wanted to slip my hand underneath her dress and cup her breast in my hand. I quickly caught myself as I felt the blood rushing

away from my brain. I shook my head violently to clear the image and keep from embarrassing myself in front of my new employee.

"I'm sorry if I irritated you," she offered.

"No, you didn't," I quickly replied.

"The hell I didn't," she laughed. "I'm extremely good at finding the weak spots and digging at them, but the problem is that I don't do it on purpose, so I never know I'm doing it until it's already done."

"Must be a hell of a way to live," I muttered.

"You have no idea,"

"Yeah, I think I have a pretty good idea," I said with a wry grin. "Look, we're going to be working together for the next few weeks, so let's just agree to be honest with each other, okay? If you piss me off, I'll let you know, and I want you to be able to do the same."

"That sounds like a great plan," she nodded. "Should we have a code word for when we are mad? You know, so that we don't scare the customers."

"Good idea," I nodded. "Do you know the Russian word for stop?"

"No, what is it?" she asked.

"*Stoya*," I replied. "It's literally the action of stopping, like in a car. And, it's short and sweet, so most won't notice if we say it."

"Wow, that's a good word. Are you fluent in Russian?" she asked.

"Something like that," I said.

"Alright, then *stoya* it is!" She smiled as we pulled up in front of the store. "This is going to be good, I think."

I nodded as I watched the driver circle the car and open the door for Lexi before coming around and opening my door. I felt like this was either going to be really good or an absolute disaster, but as Babi always scolded, "Worry is a down payment on a problem you may never have!" So, I put the negative thoughts behind me and hoped for the best.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lexi

Max unlocked the store and we got right to work placing all of the jewelry in its spots. He had an eye for detail and knew exactly where everything should go in order to maximize its glitter and shine. We worked in silence at first, but I was curious about how he'd come to own the shop and, if I was honest, I just wanted an excuse to look at him, so I began peppering him with questions.

"Did you grow up in a gem-loving family?" I teased as I pulled a rose-gold filigreed pendant with a smooth, round amethyst in middle and draped its delicate chain around one of the display stands.

"No, I did not," he said as he carefully placed a row of Orthodox cross pendants on a specially made tray. They were intricately detailed and came with a high price.

"Then, how did you get into the jewelry business?" I asked. I watched as he set and reset the pendants until he was satisfied that they were perfectly aligned on the tray.

"I was inspired by a need to break free of my family's business and strike out on my own," he said as he began inserting a series of beautiful solitaires set in gold into ring holders.

"What's your family's business?"

"My father runs a bar over on the West side and my brother works for him," he replied as he polished each ring until it reflected prisms back out into the room.

"What about your mother?" I asked. "What does she do?"

"*Stoyaa*," Max said and looked away.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go somewhere you didn't want to talk about." I quickly looked down and focused on polishing the necklaces I was getting ready to hang from the display.

"That's why it's good we have a word to say when it's enough," he smiled a little and went back to polishing the rings. I didn't know what to say to that, so I remained quiet until he spoke again. "What about you? Why are you an actress?"

"Oh gosh, I think it's probably because I have been a ham since I was in diapers," I laughed. "But seriously, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

It was like once I got the acting bug, everything else ceased to exist. I majored in Literature in college only because I thought that it would be a good thing to fall back on just in case I couldn't make the acting work right away. At least, I could write."

"And , how's that working out for you?" he asked.

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?" I said as I went back to hanging necklaces. As we worked along the cases, we moved closer to each other until he was working on the case next to the one I was at and was so close that I could feel the heat radiating off of his body. I bit my tongue to keep from making any improper noises and inhaled the scent of his cologne. So far, I'd only seen him wearing a suit, but he filled out a suit very nicely. I just wished I could check out what was underneath that suit.

"So, you're acting in theater productions, too?" he asked. I'd been so intent on imagining him out of his suit that I hadn't been paying attention, so when he spoke, I jumped a little. He turned toward me with a concerned look on his face, "You okay over there?"

"Yes, fine, thanks," I nodded. "What was the question?"

"I asked if you're in any theater productions," he replied with a small smile. I wondered if he knew what effect he was having on me, and if he did, if he was taking pleasure in the fact that he'd thrown me off kilter.

"Not right now, no," I said. "But I've got an audition later this week and I feel hopeful that I can land the part."

"What is the play?"

"Hedda Gabbler," I replied and heard him swear under his breath.

"Why, don't you like it?"

"What is it about this city?" he blurted out. "Why is it so absolutely obsessed with Ibsen? Ibsen, Ibsen, Ibsen. It seems like every damn play in the city is an Ibsen play!"

"No, please, tell me how you actually feel about Ibsen," I said dryly. Max looked over at me and burst into laughter.

"Touché," he said through his laughter. "I don't hate Ibsen, I just seem to see a lot of it. You know how there might be a certain food you really like, but then everyone thinks that's your favorite food so they make it all the time and feed it to you?"

"Okay?"

"That's how I feel about Ibsen," he sighed. "Full."

"I can see how you'd feel that way," I nodded. During his outburst, he'd moved closer, and now, I could feel the warmth radiating off of his body, making my skin tingle. I had been noticing his hands as he plucked the jeweled pieces from their padded boxes and then carefully placed them where they belonged. There was something about his long, elegant fingers

that made me wonder how they'd feel tracing a path across my naked body. I shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked. "I can turn down the air if you're too cold."

"No, I'm...I'm fine," I said as I swallowed hard and tried to focus my thoughts on the pieces I was working with. They were lovely rings made of aquamarine, amethyst, and citrine, and each of them shined like the sun under the bright lights once I'd wiped away all human fingerprints.

"Okay, if you're sure," he said watching me closely. I nodded and continued working.

"How did you learn Russian?" I asked as I turned toward him and leaned on the glass case.

"My parents and grandparents spoke it," he replied not looking up.

"Are they from Russia?"

"Yes, Moscow," he said tersely.

"You sound like you want to say *stoyaa*," I observed as I watched him diligently polish the piece of jewelry in his hand.

"I would, but you're not asking anything I can't answer."

I could see the muscles in his jaw tensing and releasing as he talked. I knew something was stressing him out, but I didn't think it was wise to push the questions at this stage of the game.

"What's your favorite color?" I said as I changed the topic completely and gave Max a rest from my questions.

"What? Oh, blue, I've always loved cornflower blue," he said. "It reminds me of the dishes in my Babi's kitchen when I was a kid."

"Bobby? Who's Bobby?" I asked. "An ex-girlfriend?"

"No, Babi, B-A-B-I" he laughed as he spelled it out for me. "It's short for Babushka, my grandmother. She lives up off of Devon and still cooks every weekend. If you're lucky, I'll bring back leftovers from her Sunday dinner while your have your run here."

"Ha ha, very funny," I said. "We both know that this is a straight up sales job passing as some kind of acting experience. Anyway, it sounds like Babi is quite a cook."

"She's the best cook ever. Last week, she made me fish soup that was out of this world."

"Now, in my family that would have been punishment," I said dryly. "I did not know anyone actually ate fish soup."

"Oh man, it's delicious," he said and then went on to describe the recipe and how to make it. When he was done, I looked up at him for a moment and felt my heart twist a little in my chest. His eyes were light and clear and he had a smile that stretched across his cheeks and lit up his entire face. He looked more than handsome, and I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

Over in my bag, my phone began demanding attention as Josh's ring tone played, stopped, and then played again. I had no desire to talk to the weasel, but I knew that if I didn't, he'd keep calling until I answered.

"Excuse me for a moment?" I asked. Max nodded and I grabbed my phone and headed toward the front door.

"What?" I hissed as I answered it.

"Heya, Sugar, how's is hanging?" Josh's smooth voice flowed through the phone and carried me back to the Jamaican beach. I could feel the ache flowing through my body for a brief moment before I shook my head and reminded myself that he'd abandoned me for a job in LA.

"Don't call me that, you know I hate it," I said in a dead tone. "What do you want?"

"Why are you so mad, Lexi?" Josh said in a sticky sweet voice. "I miss you, baby. I just wanted to call and check on you to see how you're doing."

"Give me a break, you didn't call to check on me, you want something," I shot back. "What do you want?"

"Well, I could use a little help with the expenses out here. I didn't realize just how expensive headshots were going to be, babe!"

"You're a piece of work, Josh," I laughed. "You dump me, leave me with the apartment, and move to LA all in one day, and then when things

are going a little rough in your fantasy, you call me and ask if I can bail you out? You've got to be kidding me!"

"Jeez, Lex, if you can't help, then all you have to do is say so," he pouted. "You don't have to be so mean about it. Don't you know that I still love you?"

"Josh, you are the biggest piece of shit on earth," I said. "If you were on fire in the middle of Michigan Avenue, I wouldn't step off the curb to piss on you, let alone actually help you up. You can go to hell."

"Fine, if you're going to be a total bitch about this, then I'm sorry I called!" he yelled before he disconnected.

"That son of a bitch," I muttered as I walked back to the display case where Max was finishing up one of the final arrangements of gold pendants. "Call and ask me for help, will he? That'll be the day!"

"Not good news I take it?" Max asked as I walked behind the cases and put my phone back in my bag.

"*Stoya*," I said, giving him a warning look.

"Understood," he nodded and continued to work.

We worked in silence for the next hour, and by the time five o'clock rolled around, we'd turned the store into a glittering display of some of the most gorgeous jewelry I'd ever seen. Max had a great eye when it came to color and design, and I knew that much of what he'd bought would be sold

out almost immediately. Most of the pieces were one of a kind, so any woman who wore a ring or necklace from M. Malin could rest assured that no other woman in the city would have purchased the same ring, unless she'd gone directly to Moscow to buy it.

After Max pronounced the showroom ready for our big opening the next day, I nodded, grabbed my bag and headed for the door.

"Hey, Lexi, you're welcome to have my driver take you home," he said in a voice that told me he was sorry I was having a rough time.

"Thanks," I said over my shoulder. "But today, I think I'd rather walk home. I'll see you in the morning. Bright and early."

With that, I walked out the door and headed for home, cursing Josh every step of the way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Max

After Lexi left for the day, I walked to the window and looked out onto Wabash. The traffic was bumper to bumper as people rushed to get out of town and back to the suburbs. I shook my head and wondered how anyone could live away from the city. Lost in thought, I walked over to the set of display cabinets and straightened a few pieces.

Working with Lexi put me on edge. The closer I got to her, the more I wanted to reach out and touch her soft skin. I tried to imagine her out of the clinging dress and found myself breathing heavily as I imagined releasing her generous breasts from the confines of her bra and bending down to run my tongue over her nipples. I closed my eyes and imagined how she would look spread out on my bed, looking up at me with her amber eyes, her hair spread out across the pillows as I-

"Hey, *zhopa!*" Kristov yelled as he entered the store and pushed aside my very vivid fantasy. He smelled of whisky and cigars, and I knew from the moment he opened his mouth that he was high on something. "What's happening, *bratik?*"

"Don't call me that; you know I hate it," I said in a cool voice.

"Aw, c'mon, your big brother travels all the way across town to celebrate the opening of your store and you're going to insult him?" Kristov pouted as he walked around the showroom checking out the displays. "This is some nice stuff you've got here, Maksim."

"Don't even think about it, Kristov," I warned.

"Think about what?" he asked with feigned look of innocence.

"I don't know, staging a robbery or a fire or whatever you do when you want to get insurance money instead of earning some cash," I said. I knew I was being unfair, but I also knew that he'd been sent to collect me and bring me back into the fold and that if I didn't set my limits now, I'd be a goner. He had a way of convincing people to do whatever it was he wanted them to do, and my whole life, I'd been his obedient and worshipping little brother – but not anymore.

"Oh, Max, now that's a low blow to your older brother who has done nothing but look out for you his whole life," he said as he stuck out his lip. "I'm just here to celebrate your success!"

"Bullshit. Papa sent you and you're here pull me in and take me back to Ursus, where I'll help you run the West Side business," I said matter-of-factly. "I'm not falling for this, Kristov. Papa gave me three months to make this work, and I'm going to do everything I can to make that happen."

"So, little brother has grown a spine, I see," he nodded approvingly. "You want to prove yourself. You want to make your own way. How noble of you. How very fucking noble, *bratik*."

He moved across the sales floor until he was standing less than a foot in front of me. Kristov had the solid, strong body of our father, whereas I had inherited our mother's long, lean looks. He was more brutal and less forgiving, and he carried no guilt about anything he'd done or would be willing to do to defend the family business. Sometimes, I wondered how it was that two brothers could be so different and yet so connected. Kristov had been the one who'd broken the news to me about Mama, and he'd been the one who had taken care of the arrangements for her. He'd never once cried in my presence, even when I broke down and sobbed like a child.

Kristov was the strong one. He was *vory v zakone* to the core, but he didn't have the ability to finesse situations. Instead, my brother moved in like a bull in a china shop and did whatever was necessary to get what he wanted or needed. I could see why Papa wanted us to be a team. I had no inclination to be like Kristov, and he had no desire to be like me.

"You need to settle this business and come home," he said in tone that bordered on menacing. "Papa needs you. We need you. This war is getting out of hand and we need someone who is smart enough to figure out how to get the young ones in line. I'm not it, Max. I know it. I'm the muscle. You're the brains."

"I don't want to live that life, Kristov," I said as I looked at my brother closely. He was in his mid-thirties and he looked much older. His nose was crooked from taking one to many punches, and he had a long scar running along the right side of his face where a drunken *bratán* had sliced his skin during a bar fight. He looked tired. "I don't want to live in the back room of the bar and I definitely don't want to die in the streets. I want out. I want a normal life away from all of the violence and the hiding. Don't you want that, too?"

"I want to do what is necessary for the family, Max," he said wearily as he rubbed his forehead with a large callused hand in a way that reminded me of my father. "I just want to do what I'm supposed to do and be a captain. I don't want to go to prison, and I won't ever kneel for anyone." He pulled the leg of his pants up and showed me the star that had recently been tattooed on his knee.

"You got your stars, Kristov," I said trying to sound happy for him. "That's a huge honor. Did you get all of them?"

"No, that's the thing," he said looking at me. "I won't get all of my stars until you get yours."

"He's holding back your stars until you bring me home?" I said, aghast with the realization of what this meant. Getting stars meant you were a true *vory v zakone*. It meant that you were a captain who commanded the men under you. When stars were tattooed on the knees, it meant that the man being tattooed was his own man, that he would never kneel for anyone. But stars had to be given by the head of the organization — in this case, Papa.

"Yep, that's exactly what he's doing," my brother said. "He's holding me hostage until I can get you back in the fold."

"Fuck!" I shouted as I slammed my hand down on the display case. Everything inside tipped over and jewelry spilled everywhere. "That's not right! He can't do that to you! He can't do that to me!"

"He can do whatever he wants, *bratik*," he said, shaking his head slowly. "He's the boss."

I stood staring out the front window with my fists clenched by my sides as I thought about how my father's promise to let me see if this business could be a success had been a lie designed to placate me when he knew that he was going to blackmail me back into the fold. I felt the rage boiling up under the surface.

"Don't, Max," my brother said as he gripped my shoulder. "Just don't."

I looked at my brother helplessly and realized that his life now depended on me, and the decisions I would make. My father was ruthless when it came to protecting the business and we were just the price he would pay to take care of things. I reached out and gripped Kristov's shoulders and looked him in the eye as I said, "I won't allow this to happen."

"You may not have a choice," he replied with a grin that chilled my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lexi

Instead of going home, I walked over to Peter's office. His receptionist said he was in a meeting, but told me he'd be done shortly, so I sat down and waited for him to finish. The phone call from Josh had opened a wound that was still way too fresh and I felt the anger begin to surface as I thought about him. He'd dumped me and then called to ask for my help! What nerve!

"Ms. Wallace? Mr. Baxter will see you now," the receptionist said, pulling me out of my rumination.

"What? Oh, thank you." I got up and headed down the hall to Peter's office.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't my favorite star!" Peter smiled as I entered the room.

"Yeah, I bet you say that to all the actors on your roster," I grinned.

"But thanks for making me feel special."

"I do try to make everyone feel good, but not everyone is a star," he laughed. "Come in and sit down; what's going on? How's the job going?"

"It's good. I like Max, he's a nice guy," I said trying to keep everything on a professional level. "The store is beautiful and the things he's imported are exquisite. I think he'll be able to find someone in no time, but it's nice to be helping out while he looks."

"Great review, now tell me what's really going on," Peter said as he reached under his desk and pulled out what was probably his tenth diet soda of the day. On an average day, he'd go through a case of it. I wondered if the chemicals were what kept him looking so young at fifty.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, now tell me what's really going on," he repeated popping the top on the can and drinking deeply. When he finished, he set the can down and gestured at it. "Want one?"

"No, I'm good, thanks," I shook my head. "Peter, everything is a mess. Josh called me at work and asked for money, and I lost my cool."

"In front of the Malinchenko guy?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Max, your boss," he said as he looked at a stack of papers on his desk and began tossing sheets in the trash. "Did you lose your cool in front of him?"

"I guess so, but I was quiet about it," I said. "Wait, I thought his last name was Malin."

"Ah, so he took my advice," Peter nodded. "Look, kid, that little piece of crap McLean is a nobody. Don't waste your time crying over him. He's a third rate actor who is going to get nothing but crowd-filler parts. You're the professional. You've got skills and a chance to do something big."

"He's not a third rate actor, he's got a pilot in LA!" I cried. "He dumped me to move there for a sitcom!"

"Kid, you are far too gullible," Peter said as he stopped sorting papers and looked at me. "That guy doesn't have a part in a sitcom. I talked to his agent two days ago, and he said that he had told McLean that if he wanted real work, he was going to have to get to a big city."

"You meant he didn't have a job?" I said. I was stunned that Josh had not only lied to me, but that he then had the nerve to keep the lie going. How blind was I to believe him?

"Nope, nothing," Peter answered. "Now you, you are a different matter. Are you ready for your audition this weekend?"

"I've been running my lines with Viv and I think I'm ready," I said. Peter loved Viv and was always trying to get her to consider a career in acting, but she didn't have the patience for all of the auditions, so she kept turning him down.

"You've really got a shot at this one, kid," he said. "I'm not kidding, this part is one of the big ones and I think that if you can land it, you'll get the attention you deserve. Plus, it's a six-month run at top pay!"

"Yeah, and you get ten percent of it, don't remind me," I said with a grim smile.

"C'mon, isn't this all worth it?" he said spreading his arms wide and looking around the small office. "I mean, we have a classy operation going here!"

"You're too much!" I burst out laughing as he leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "But yes, you are definitely worth it."

"All right then, you get out there and nail that part, kid!" he smiled. "I have faith in you!"

I left Peter's office feeling better about my chances of landing the role in the play, but worse about what had happened with Josh. I walked home, and by the time I opened my front door, I had put the drama of Josh McLean behind me and was looking forward to my audition.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Max

My brother's visit to the store left me feeling enraged by my father's empty promise, and I needed an outlet for my anger. I had my driver take me home, where I quickly changed into shorts, a t-shirt, and my favorite running shoes, and headed out to the lake for a long run. I thought about all of the ways in which my father had lied to us over the years as my feet pounded the pavement.

Usually, running was my outlet for frustration, but this time, the farther I ran, the angrier I felt. I felt betrayed and foolish that I'd trusted my father to be true to his word. I should have seen the deception and I beat myself up for not having thought of all the angles before I'd gone to see him. I felt abandoned, and more than anything, I missed my mother. She had always been the one who had reminded me of the good things about my father, and

she'd been the one to soothe hurt feelings on both sides of any disagreement. She loved us all so much, and right now, I wished she were there to help find a way to stop my father from forcing me to do something I didn't want to do.

"Damn him!" I muttered as I opened the front door to my apartment.

"What did you say, darling?" Natalia said, emerging from the kitchen carrying two glasses of red wine and wearing an outfit that was definitely designed to attract attention.

"What are you doing here?" I said. I was irritated that she'd let herself in without calling first, but I'd given her a set of keys, so I had no one to blame but myself.

"I'm here to help you, Max," she purred as she set the wine down on the table in the entry and moved toward me. She was wearing a form-fitting black blouse that emphasized her large breasts, a short, black leather skirt that looked like she'd been sewn into it, and a pair of black suede boots that stopped just below the skirt's hem to give a glimpse of the lacy tops of her thigh-high stockings and the garters that held them up.

"You look like a walking felony," I said as I tossed my keys on the table next to the wine and walked toward the bedroom.

"Thank you, I think," she laughed as she followed me. "What's wrong with you, Max? Why are you so uptight?"

"I've got a lot on my mind, Nat," I said as I pulled off my t-shirt and shorts and prepared to step into the shower.

"My God, you are an exquisite man," she said as she leaned against the doorway and watched me undress. "I can never get enough of that body of yours."

"Good to know," I said tersely. "Mind if I take a shower now or do you need to ogle me a bit more?"

"Oh, I'd like to do much more than just ogle you, Max," she grinned as she walked across the room. I felt myself becoming hard as I watched her hips sway as she walked. She was undeniably sexy, and without the cover of clothing, I couldn't hide my response. She looked straight at me as she dropped her voice, "You like what you see, do you?"

I said nothing; I , simply dropped the clothing I'd been holding and reached out to roughly grab her so I could pull her against me. She let out a throaty laugh as I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against me. I grabbed a fistful of her shiny, black hair and pulled her head back before grinding my lips against hers in a brutal kiss. She responded by reaching around and digging her nails into my back and running them all the way down the length of my body.

I growled as my hands groped her body to find the hem of her blouse and yanked it up over her head. I dug a hand into the lacy fabric of her bra

and pulled out one of her breasts before lowering my head and sucking hard on the already engorged nipple. She moaned and grabbed two fistfuls of my hair, pulling hard as we battled for control of each other's bodies. I could feel her need as I yanked her skirt up and pushed my hand between her legs, and as she groaned, I pushed her panties to the side and shoved her back against the wall. I gripped her waist and quickly lifted her up onto the dresser before roughly spreading her legs and plunging into her warm, wet opening.

She moaned as I entered her and then pushed her hips forward to meet my thrusts, digging her nails into my shoulders. I held her waist and rammed myself into her over and over again as she groaned and urged me to do it harder and faster. I felt myself lose control as I took out all my anger, rage, and pain on her body. She cried out for more as I thrust into her more violently, seeking relief from the feelings that were threatening to pull me under.

I could feel myself getting close to the edge, and I tried to hold back long enough for her to reach the peak first, but I was too far-gone and in an instant, I felt myself letting go and falling over the edge. I could feel myself releasing inside her as I remained buried in her warmth. A wave of heat passed through my body as I jerked and throbbed. I could hear her moaning

softly as she ran her hands down the length of my back and pressed her cheek against my shoulder.

"Wow, that was some run you must have had," she laughed softly when both of us were breathing normally again.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I rested my head on her shoulder and breathed deeply.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, patting my head. "The question is whether you are okay or not."

"I'm good," I nodded.

"Then, let me get off of this dresser. My ass is getting cold on this glass top," she said, lightly smacking my shoulder.

"Oh, sorry. Here, let me help you." I stepped back and helped her down off of her perch.

"Are you sure you're okay, Max?" she asked, looking at me with a great deal of concern. "That was pretty intense."

"I'm okay, Nat," I nodded. "I've just got a lot on my mind with the store opening tomorrow and my family stuff."

"Was your dad responsible for that shooting?" she asked as she located her blouse and pulled it on.

That was the thing I loved about Natalia. She understood my family situation because hers was very similar. Her father had defected and moved

the family to Chicago around the same time my father had moved us here. When I was with Nat, there was a lot I didn't have to say. She understood the *vory v zakone* and she was just as wary of it as I was, only as a woman, she was expected to marry one of the *bratán*, whether she wanted to or not. Us getting together solved a host of problems for both of us, and the friendship had lasted because we both knew that we didn't want to get sucked into the thieving life.

At one point, when it looked like she was going to have to marry a guy who was a high ranking captain in her father's gang, I asked her to marry me. She turned me down, saying that she knew I loved her, but that we weren't like that and to pretend that we were was a lie she just couldn't live with. Soon after, she convinced her father that she wasn't cut out for marrying anyone and went off to college. By the time she returned, her father had been killed in a dispute over a shipment that hadn't contained what was promised. She mourned the loss of her father, but was glad to be freed from his iron rule.

"I don't know, Nat," I shrugged. "He might have been, but I don't think it was him this time. I think he's lost control of the younger ones and that's why he's cracking down on me and Kristov." I told her about my father's promise and my brother's visit to the shop.

"Man, that's fucked up, Max," she said shaking her head. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know; what can I do?" I asked. "I'm going to run the shop for as long as I can, and then when things get unbearable, maybe I'll just disappear and never come back."

"I'd miss you if you did that," she said punching me lightly.

"I'd take you with me, if you wanted to go, Nat," I told her. "And, you know that."

"What, and leave all of this?" She grinned. "Nah, I'm good. Pop left me enough money to last me a lifetime and the *bratán* now know that I'm off limits. I couldn't leave Mama or Babi. How would they survive without me?"

"Good point," I nodded. "But still, the offer stands."

"And, I love you for that, Max," she said standing on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

I pulled her to me and held her tightly against my chest for a moment before letting go and heading into the bathroom.

"What do you want for dinner?" she called on her way out of the bedroom. "I'm thinking Italian. How does that sound?"

"Order whatever you want," I yelled. "I don't care."

I stood under the hot water for a long time, letting it pound on my head as I tried to figure out how I could extract myself from my father's plan to pull me into his business. I couldn't see a way out that would allow me the freedom I desperately desired. My worst fear was that I would have to drop everything and simply disappear, but I knew that if it came down to it, I would choose disappearing on my own terms over those of my father.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lexi

When I arrived home after meeting with Peter, Viv was curled up on the couch snuggling Anna and talking to her about the latest issue of *In Style*. I laughed when I saw Anna sitting on Viv's stomach, patting the pages of the magazine as Viv rattled off the benefits of each skin care product listed in the article she was reading.

Viv was a makeup artist for a well-known line in one of the local department stores and she moonlighted with a number of theaters in the city. It was the perfect job for someone as social and outgoing as she was, and she had a mind like a steel trap, which made it possible for her to remember thousands of products and immediately discern which one was right for which person. It also made her an excellent person for me to run my lines with since she quickly recognized any mistakes and lovingly

pointed them out to me. There had been times during college when I'd wondered if our roles should be flipped and that Viv should be the actor, but she'd reassured me that she had zero desire to be on stage. She wanted to be behind the scenes – not in them.

"Honey, I'm home!" I called as I walked through the door. Viv looked up and smiled as Anna chirped loudly and hopped up onto the back of the couch. I walked over and scooped her up, causing her to meow loudly before mushing my shoulder and drooling on it as she purred in my ear. "Wow, this is an awesome welcoming committee."

"And, dinner is in the oven," Viv told me as she set the magazine down and got up off of the couch. "You hungry?"

"Starving," I said. "We were too busy to take a lunch break, and then I got involved in some Josh drama and was too mad."

"Josh drama? Do tell," she said as she moved toward the kitchen.

"Let me change out of these clothes first," I called as I headed down the hallway to the bedroom. Anna protested loudly when I set her down on the bed. I laughed as I scolded her, "Oh behave, little one; I can't carry you around everywhere!"

When we returned to the front room, Viv had brought two plates loaded with ribs, potato salad, coleslaw, and cornbread out into the living room.

She'd opened a bottle of zinfandel and poured two very generous glasses to go with the meal.

"Now, spill the details!" she demanded as she handed me a plate and a fork then sat down on the couch and dug in.

I spent the next half hour telling her everything that had happened that day, including the tension that I felt building between Max and me. Despite the stress of the call from Josh, I still couldn't stop thinking about how it had felt to be so close to my handsome boss. And I wondered out loud what he would be like without the suit on.

"You should find out, Lex," she urged. "I mean, how often do you meet a rich, handsome guy who owns a jewelry store? And, if he's smart, all the better!"

"Don't get so worked up about it, Viv," I warned. "It's just a temp job for a few weeks until he can hire a professional salesperson to take over. I'm not going to be around long enough for him to get attached to me, and I'm not ready to hop into another relationship. Hello? Josh just dumped me!"

"Oh please, Josh had been dumping you for years," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "You just chose not to see it. Now you're free, and I think that this boss of yours is the perfect guy to rebound with! I mean, he's handsome, rich, and he obviously likes you or he wouldn't have hired you for this job!"

"Viv, let's not go overboard here," I warned. "He hired me because he had few other choices. I was a poor substitute for a real salesperson, but I looked good enough to play the part. That's all this is — me playing a role for a guy who needs to run a business."

"Pshaw! He's going to fall head over heels for you before the end of your employment," she said. I raised an eyebrow and stared at her. "Okay, well, maybe not head over heels, but he's going to be smitten."

"You are an eternal optimist, Viv," I laughed as she held out a wet-nap for me to wipe my face with.

"I'm just a romantic dreamer," she countered, batting her lashes as she wiped her face. "I believe in true love and all the magic it entails."

"You're certifiable," I laughed. Anna hopped into my lap and patted my arm. I looked down at her and smiled as I picked her up and cuddled her, "And, you are a good, sweet girl! Spoiled, but a good, sweet girl."

Viv smiled and then changed the subject. For the next hour, she told me all about the impossible clients she'd worked with during the day and the new job she'd landed with one of the theaters in Edgewater. We laughed about the things actors had in common with everyday folks who visited her counter at the store, and then we spent another two hours running my lines while Anna hopped between us, batting at the scripts.

"This is so dark!" Viv remarked as we ran through the scene in which Hedda encourages Eilert to commit suicide and gives him the pistol with which to do it.

"I know, but it's such an intimate look at the psychology of women in the nineteenth century!" I said excitedly.

"Nineteenth century, hell, it's the twenty-first century, too," she said as she looked at the next portion of the script. "This has every dramatic element of a good reality television show."

"Ibsen would turn over in his grave if he heard you say that," I replied.

"If he knew what a television was," she shot back and we both collapsed into a fit of laughter.

Two hours later, Viv and I called it a night. She had agreed to sleep over and do my makeup in the morning so that I looked flawless for the first day of sales at the store. I was grateful that she would be there in the morning to help me get ready and calm my nerves.

Anna, however, was confused and spent the night traveling between my bed and the couch, chirping happily at having two warm bodies to snuggle with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Max

I woke up before dawn the next morning feeling tense and anxious about the store's opening day. I'd taken out plenty of ads in the daily papers and paid a great deal of money to online promoters to set up Facebook accounts and Twitter feeds and to get the Malin brand name out into the public. I was hoping that the grand opening would provide me with a chance to get to know the type of customers who would be shopping at the store and maybe even ferret out a few big spenders from the get go.

I knew that if Papa got wind of an opening that was less than stellar, it would make him bolder in his attempt to force me back into the family business, and I didn't want to leave him even the slightest opening. I thought about Kristov's visit and wondered how I could help my brother while maintaining my own, separate identity. I knew he needed me much

more than I needed him, and that his ability to succeed was now completely dependent on my willingness to come back and serve the family.

I quickly showered and dressed before drinking the coffee Natalia had set up for me the night before. She never stayed the night with me. She said she needed the space and comfort of her own bed, but I knew that it was also her way of keeping a safe distance between us out of the fear that one of us would get too attached. She was odd that way, but I loved her for her pragmatism.

I called my driver and told him that we were going to make a detour before heading to the store. He nodded and drove north to Babi's. I stopped at a small flower shop and bought her a bouquet of the mixed summer flowers that she loved before we reached her flat. Despite the early hour, she was already outside sweeping the walk. Many of her neighbors thought she was a crazy old lady, but I knew that part of the reason Babi swept was to keep an eye on the neighborhood kids. She didn't trust the gangs that ran in the neighborhood, but they were well aware that she was Vladimir Malinchenko's mother so they tended to steer clear when she was out. Babi saw her sweeping as a contribution to keeping the community kids safe from the violence that Russian gangs brought to the neighborhood, allowing them to hang on to their childhood for just a little longer.

Knowing how the gangs operated, I'd scolded Babi for being so reckless. That is, until she reached inside the pocket of the floral apron she always wore while sweeping and showed me that she carried a small pistol my father had bought for her. The handle was mother-of-pearl and there was a Russian orthodox cross etched into it. After that, I didn't worry as much.

"Good morning, Babi!" I called as I got out of the car and headed up the walk.

"Maksimka! What are you doing here? Doesn't your store open today?" she asked with a worried look. "Why are you here?"

"Babi, I have a problem," I said. I knew I was taking a risk in spilling the problem to my father's mother, but I also knew that if anyone could see a way out of this dilemma, it would be my grandmother.

"Come in and tell me what you need while I fix breakfast for you," she said as she climbed the porch stairs.

"I'm okay, Babi. I don't need breakfast," I protested.

"Pshaw! Everyone needs breakfast," she said, waving her hand at me. "Come upstairs while I cook and we will talk."

I followed her into the kitchen and watched as she poured me a steaming mug of coffee and then quickly whipped up batter and began making thin crepes, which she flipped onto a plate and urged me to eat

while they were still hot. Watching Babi cook was like watching a tornado. You couldn't believe what you were seeing until it was all over.

"Eat! Eat!" she yelled at me as she flipped yet another perfectly browned circle out of the pan and onto the plate in front of me. "These don't keep, so you need to eat them while they're hot!"

I told her the story of my meeting with my father and the visit from Kristov as I chewed on the hot crepes filled with blueberry jam. She didn't say much as I spoke. She only asked a few questions and then went silent. When she had run out of batter and had flipped the last crepe onto the stack still remaining on the plate, she turned and looked at me.

"Maksimka, I know you want me to talk to your father," she began in a voice weighted down by family obligation and love. "But I'm not going to do it. Do you know why I'm not going to do it?"

"No, Babi," I shook my head.

"I'm not going to do it because your father is the head of this family and he has the right to make the decisions he needs to make in order to keep us all safe," she said carefully. "I'm not going to interfere with his ability to run his business."

"Okay, Babi, I understand." I was disappointed that there was no one in our family strong enough to stand up to my father and convince him that

making me become part of the *vory v zakone* was a terrible idea. I would have to find another way.

"However." The word hung over the table like a cloud of hope.

"However, I will talk to the priest at my church and see if he can work it into the sermon."

I looked at my grandmother with wide eyes because I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My Babi, a Russian orthodox Catholic who went to church every morning and twice on Sunday's, was going to ask her priest to intervene in a mafia family's business. My father would have a fit.

"Babi, I don't think that's such a good idea," I said hesitatingly. "I don't think Papa will like it, and more than that, I don't think he'll even hear it!"

"Oh, he'll hear it all right," she told me with a twinkle in her eye and a smile playing around her lips. "He'll hear it from all the babushkas over on the West side who come here for mass on Sundays. They'll take the message back and pound their own kids over the heads with it and those kids are parents of kids your age, and they are cronies of your father."

"Babi, that's so crazy, it might just work," I said, looking at her in amazement.

"Oh please, give me a break, Maksimka," she said waving me off with feigned disgust. "How do you think we made kids behave in the old country before all this technology made your brains soft?"

I laughed at her admission, took a swig of coffee, and got up. Babi quickly wrapped up the leftovers and put them in a neat container for me.

"Thank you, but I've got enough for lunch," I said looking at her confused.

"Not for you, Maksimka, for your poor driver who is out there starving to death in the car!" she scolded as she smacked my behind and then patted my cheek. "You have so much to learn."

I leaned down, gathered her in a tight hug, and held her long enough that I felt the emotions begin to well up inside me. I understood my grandmother's feelings about family and loyalty and I didn't dispute the fact that they were essential to the continuation of the family tradition, but I couldn't bear the thought of being trapped by an outdated notion of loyalty and I didn't want to be caught in the deadly business that my father dealt in. Not even for my Babi.

"Remember, Maksimka," Babi said as she pressed her hand against my cheek. "*Ty nasha radast.*"

"I know, Babi, but I don't feel like I can make anyone very happy right now," I said as I walked to the door. "I'll keep trying, though."

She smiled at me as I looked at her over my shoulder, and then she turned back to the sink and started to do the dishes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lexi

I chose another form-fitting wrap dress, this time in emerald green, to wear for the store's grand opening. Viv did a smoky eye and neutral lipstick before pronouncing me drop dead gorgeous and then told me to leave my hair down. I questioned her judgment and told her that I was going to work, not a nightclub, and that the smoky eye was dramatic enough as I pulled my hair back into a loose bun at the nape of my neck.

I didn't own any really nice jewelry and I didn't feel like today was the right day for my bold fakes, so I slipped on my watch and the necklace that Max had given me on my first day and decided that the makeup and dress would have to do. Anna was beside herself as she chirped and hopped around the bathroom while I got ready. Viv laughed when the kitten tried to jump into the shower with her, but fell backwards onto the soft bathmat.

Anna haughtily marched out of the bathroom, humiliated by her ordeal, but was quickly soothed with a fresh bowl of kitten food and a snuggle under my chin.

An hour after we'd woken up, Viv and I exited the apartment and headed in opposite directions. She told me I looked like a knock out before she turned and headed toward Michigan Avenue. I walked to the El stop, this time certain that I'd grabbed my wallet. Ten minutes later, I got off the train at Wabash and headed to the store. As I descended the stairs from the platform, I ran through the list of all of the things I'd learned about gems and jewelry. Max had been good about tutoring me as we worked, but my brain felt overloaded with the information on top of the words I had to remember for my audition, and I felt nervous about trying to sell.

When I buzzed the office to be let in, I noticed that the name of the shop had been painted on the window in large gold letters. It looked classic and simple, and when I pushed open the door and stepped onto the sales floor, I got a rush of excitement as I realized that this was what our customers would be seeing for the first time today. Large glass cases stood at attention and shined brilliantly under the chandelier lights hanging from the ceilings. Everything in the cases sparkled and dazzled under the lights and I inhaled deeply as I took it all in. The sales floor looked like a

wonderland of exotic jewels and metals, and I instantly knew we were going to be a hit.

"Lexi, are you okay?" Max called from the back room. "What's going on?"

"I'm coming!" I called as I quickly headed toward his office and set my bag down in the corner. "Where are you?"

"In the store room getting the diamonds," he answered. "Come help me, please?"

When I entered the storeroom, I gasped. Max was wearing a navy blue suit that fit him like a glove. His dress shirt was a shade of blue I'd never seen before and it matched his eyes perfectly, making them even more mesmerizing than usual. He'd let his hair go a little wilder than usual, giving him the look of a thoughtful artist. I was rendered mute and couldn't look away.

"Um, good morning," he finally said.

"Good morning," I replied as I stared up at him, unable to tear my gaze away from his handsome face.

"Are you ready to sell today, Lexi?" he asked in a voice that made me shiver.

"Uh huh," was all I could manage in response before he handed me a stack of display boxes that contained our diamonds.

"Why don't you start putting these out on the floor and I'll bring the rest out to you," he said as he turned back to the safe and began pulling out more cases.

"Um, okay, I'll put these out and you can bring me the rest," I repeated dumbly as I backed out of the room and headed for the display case. I silently cursed myself for being so awkward and stupid as I arranged the boxes in the displays. Max brought out the rest of the boxes and set them on the end of the counter before turning and heading to the office. He didn't say a word.

The awkwardness lingered until a man in a very expensive Isaia suit rang the doorbell and was buzzed in. He crossed the floor and approached me. "Good morning, young lady. I want to buy some jewelry for my wife and I need something that will apologize for forty-five years of being her forgetful husband."

I stared at him for a moment before I burst out laughing. A smile spread across his wide face as I tried to contain my mirth.

"And what kind of piece do you think would best represent your heartfelt apology, sir?" I asked before I began laughing again.

"Well, I don't know. That's why I came to the experts. I thought you could tell me what was required of me," he said, sending me back into a fit of laughter that brought Max out of the backroom to see what was going on.

"I'm Max Malin and this is my-" Max began, firmly shaking the other man's hand.

"Yes, yes, yes, you and your wife have a beautiful shop here, Mr. Malin, quiet beautiful indeed," interrupted the man as he kept shaking Max's hand. "Sergei Petrov, that's me, and I have been watching your store with great interest. I wanted to be the first to stop in and do business with you this morning."

"Mr. Petrov, we're not..." Max tried to correct the man's error, but Petrov wouldn't stop talking long enough for him to get a word in edgewise, and over the next thirty minutes as I pulled out piece after piece, Mr. Petrov told us his story about making a fortune in the tech industry, but wanting to invest in something more stable. I listened to what he was saying and was skeptical at first, but the more he talked and the more pieces he looked at, the more I realized that this man was interested in backing the store as a silent partner and that the amount of money he was offering meant that Max would be able to buy the best quality pieces and not have to worry about the expense.

"I've got a lot of connections in the shipping industry," Petrov said as he pointed to the amber ring I was holding and a matching necklace in the case next to it. "I'll take both of those, Mrs. Malin. And, could you wrap them up nice and pretty so that I can surprise her?"

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Petrov," I smiled as I pulled out two of our signature black boxes with gold writing on the top and proceeded to wrap them at the front counter. It was a good thing I did because Max seemed intent on killing our sale and our deal.

"Where's your ring, Mrs. Malin?" Petrov asked as I wrapped the boxes.

"Oh, she's not-" Max began.

"I'm not wearing them because Mr. Malin bought me such a beautiful ring that I don't dare wear it in the store," I smiled, then dropped my voice to a conspiratorial whisper and added, "He's got exquisite taste, but sometimes he goes a little overboard."

"Well, if that's the case, then you've got to use that taste to bulk up the exquisite collection here in the store, Malin," Petrov bellowed. "Only the best, no expense spared is my motto!"

I shot Max a look that told him that if he knew what was good for him, he would shut up and not say another word. Max nodded and listened to Petrov talk about the ups and downs of the tech industry and his frustration with the way in which he couldn't find good people to run the factories he had bought in Moscow and China.

"I need old school guys, you know? The ones who knew what it meant to work for a union! The loyal guys who knew how to work a full day," he sighed as I placed the wrapped boxes in a black bag and handed them over.

Mr. Petrov gave me his heavy, black American Express card and I ran it, knowing that there would be no issue with it going through. After he'd signed the receipt, Petrov shook Max's hand and told him that a lawyer would be around in the morning with all of the paperwork, and that Max should have his own lawyer read it before signing anything.

"Never sign anything without reading it, Mr. Malin," he warned. "I learned that as a child in Moscow. A beginner's mistake."

"Very well, sir," Max said as Petrov headed toward the door.

"Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Malin!" Petrov called over his shoulder. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you both!"

And then, he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Max

After Sergei Petrov had left the store, I turned to Lexi and asked, "What in the hell was that?"

"I believe you just landed yourself a new business partner," she replied with a smile. The smile quickly faded as she added, "And, if I'm not mistaken, a wife."

"I'm not even sure who I am right now," I said as I stared at her, shocked by the turn of events and overwhelmed by the amount of confusion I was feeling. She looked at me and then burst out laughing.

"Apparently you are my husband, Mr. Malin," she laughed and then kept laughing until she was holding her sides as tears ran down her cheeks. "Max, we've been open for exactly two hours and this shop is going to go down in history as one where the most money, mergers, and marriages took

place all at the same time!" She dissolved into laughter again and had to lean against the wall to keep from sinking to the floor.

"I have no idea what just happened," I said as I started chuckling. Soon, I was laughing as hard as Lexi was, and from the outside of the store we must have looked absolutely insane. "He just offered to bankroll this business, didn't he?"

"Yes, he certainly did!" she replied, wiping her eyes and checking her makeup in the mirror. She looked even lovelier than she had when she'd walked through the door this morning. The green dress hugged her curves and laughter had made her beautiful amber eyes sparkle. I'd had the urge to reach around and undo the pins that held her hair in the twist at the nape of her neck this morning in the storeroom, but I'd stopped myself just in time. Now as I looked at her, the urge was even stronger and I was afraid of what I wanted to do – of what I might do if she gave me even the smallest sign of encouragement.

"Well, we're going to have to figure something out for Mr. Petrov," I said as I ran one hand through my hair and looked out the front window. "He thinks we're married, and I don't know if that's a deal breaker, but I'm not so sure I want to find out."

"Yes, that would be a bad way to lose out on something that could be so profitable for your business," she nodded. I watched her as she carefully

reset the displays from which she had taken the ring and the necklace that Petrov had bought. Her sense of space and design were impeccable, and I got lost in the movement of her hands as she slid the other pieces around to make a new arrangement that gave no hint of the missing merchandise.

"I've got an idea," I said suddenly. It was an absolutely insane idea, but it was the only one I could think of in the moment. "What if we acted like we were married? Until the deal is closed and I've got the money?"

"Acted like we're married?" she repeated as she looked up at me expectantly. "What do you mean? Like, wear wedding bands while we're in the store? Sure, why not?"

"No, I mean all the way," I said. I was pretty sure that if Sergei Petrov was going to invest millions of dollars in my jewelry business, he was going to also have me checked out thoroughly, and it dawned on me that if he was going to check me out, he'd realize Lexi and I weren't married. "We'll plan a wedding, our wedding, and we'll broadcast it on social media and show Petrov what kind of a high end event we can produce."

"We're going to plan our own wedding?" she asked, dumbfounded by my outlandish plan. "What are you going to do when he discovers that we're two complete strangers who have duped him?"

"Well, I didn't think that far ahead," I sheepishly admitted. I'd thought ahead all right, and a part of me wondered what could happen if we went

ahead with it.

"I did," she said. "And, I'm looking at a bad ending for this little fairy tale, Mr. Malin. A very bad ending."

"It could also end up being really, really good," I smiled. "Are you afraid of that?"

"What are you talking about?" she said. "Okay, look, here's how it looks on paper. Two complete strangers, one of whom has been hired to work for the other in an acting sales position, decide to plan their own wedding in order to bamboozle a potential investor into putting money into a brand-new business. Oh, and they do this soon after they first met! Oh, nothing could go wrong there! Nothing at all!"

I looked at her and smiled as she stared back at me, waiting for a response.

"You are completely out of your cotton-picking mind, Mr. Malin," she said.

"I'll pay you an extra thousand dollars a week for planning and another thousand if you'll move into my place while we do the planning," I said, deciding to go for broke. I had very little to lose in this situation and everything to gain. Lexi had no idea the kind of timeline we were on in order to bring in our first million, and I knew that if Petrov backed us, we'd

up our chances of making the money, and maybe even exceeding it, by the deadline Papa had set.

"Are you insane?" she yelled as a woman hit the buzzer and Lexi let her into the store. As the woman approached, Lexi turned to me and quietly said, "*Stoya.*"

"Oh, Mr. Malin, your wife speaks Russian, does she? How charming!" the woman said. She was in her mid-fifties and had the elegant style of someone who was well cared for and looked after. "I'm Ivana Zakharov, and Sergei Petrov said you have the most beautiful selection of Russian jewelry in the city. I need something special for a party I'm attending this weekend. A statement piece, really."

For the next hour, Lexi and I ran around the store picking out pieces for Mrs. Zakharov to try on. She bought four of them, and as Lexi was wrapping them up, she smiled and said, "You've got a good husband, Mrs. Malin."

"Oh, he's not my husband – yet," Lexi smiled. "We're getting married in August, and we're planning a huge event! You'll have to come join us!"

"Oh dear, that will be an event, now won't it?" she said excited to be included in the wedding plans. "I'm going to have to buy a new dress and I'll need new jewelry as well! Will you have new pieces in by then, Mr. Malin?"

"Of course," I smiled. "We'll have all the best pieces to choose from – after my bride picks, of course."

Mrs. Zakharov smiled as she signed the receipt and took the bag from Lexi before calling out, "I'm going to tell all of my friends to come here!"

As I watched our newest customer leave, it dawned on me that Lexi had agreed to marry me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lexi

As Mrs. Zakharov left the store, I turned and looked at Max. He was staring at me with a strange look on his face.

"What?" I asked. "Is there a problem here?"

"Not at all," he said as a smile spread across his handsome face. I wanted to run over to him, grab his face, and pull it down so I could kiss him. Instead, I began shifting the merchandise around in the display case making sure there were no holes after we'd sold Mrs. Zakharov her statement pieces. I heard Max move in behind me and quietly ask, "You agreed, right?"

"If you are asking whether I agreed to participate in the planning of a sham marriage in order to ensure that you could make a deal with Sergei Petrov," I said haughtily. "Then the answer is yes, Mr. Malin. I did."

Max looked at me, nodded, and then turned and walked toward the office. I called after him, "Hey, fiancé!"

"Yes?"

"May I have the afternoon off so I can pack and get moved into your place?" I grinned before adding, "By the way, where will I be living?"

"I'll have the moving company pack up your things and bring them over," he deadpanned. "And, if you're nice to me, I'll tell you where they brought them once they're done."

I thought I saw a small smile cross his lips as my peals of laughter rang out through the store. By the time I had regained my composure, a group of women were ringing the front bell and I let them all in. The afternoon passed quickly as I sold piece after piece of the collections we had on display, and by the time closing time rolled around, we'd sold out of most of the more expensive pieces.

"How much did we sell today?" Max asked as he emerged from the back room with another tray of replacement pieces for the displays. Around lunchtime, he had exited the store and come back whistling, and I'd been dying to ask him where he'd gone, but I didn't dare with all the women in the store gathered around, looking at things.

"If my math is correct, we sold one-hundred-forty-thousand three-hundred and sixty-six dollars worth of merchandise," I said as casually as I

could. That sum was more money that I'd seen in my entire life and more than my brain could imagine right now. "That's a lot of money, Max."

"That's nothing Mrs. Malin-to-be," he replied as he replenished the collections along the wall. "We're going to pull in money hand over fist as soon as Petrov infuses a little cash for me to pay the suppliers and carriers."

"It seems like we did pull it in hand over fist today," I said staring at the receipts and wondering who had so much money that they could spend tens of thousands on one trip to a jewelry store. "Where are all these people from?"

"Moscow, St. Petersburg ," he tossed off as he carefully placed a pendant on a stand and then arranged the chain so that it hung gracefully down behind it. "All over, really, but you need to understand that Russians and Ukrainians, the rich ones, love sparkly shiny things. The women especially love bright colors and flashy jewelry. We're going to be selling a lot of it and I'm going to put in an order to triple our stock tonight. We should have full back stock by the beginning of next week."

"So, we're really going to do this, are we?" I asked quietly. I still wasn't sure that Max had meant it when he'd said he'd pay me twice what I was already making to play along with this farce.

"We are, if you're still willing," he said, turning to face me. As I gazed across the room at him, I noticed something sad in his eyes.

"Are you okay with it, Max?" I asked. "If you're not, we don't have to do it."

"Lexi, we need to do this. I need to do this," he said slowly, then shook his head as if to clear it. "Yes, I'm absolutely sure. Are you?"

"I'm sure," I said. "I need the money, but more than that, I want to help you do whatever it is you need to do to make this business succeed. I'm in."

"Alright, well, go take care of whatever you need to take care of, and I'll get someone to come move your things this evening," he said as he turned back to the display cases. Then he turned back around, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a key ring with three keys attached to it. He tossed it to me saying, "Here, these are the keys to my – our place. 65 W Goethe Street."

"Hey! You live right around the corner from me!" I laughed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to think I was some kind of weirdo," he said with a smile.

"Too late, Mr. Malin; it's already been confirmed," I laughed. He laughed loudly as I ran back to the office, grabbed my bag, and headed out to meet Viv at the Royal Cafe on Michigan Avenue. She was not going to believe what was about to happen.

"You're what?" Viv screeched so loudly that everyone in the diner turned and looked in our direction.

"I'm getting married," I repeated.

"Wally, what the hell is going on over at that store?" she asked breathlessly. "And more importantly, can I get a piece of the action? Does Mr. Money Bags have a brother?"

"Viv, settle down," I warned. "You're getting ridiculous. But come to think of it, I have no idea whether he has a brother or not. There's a lot I don't yet know about my betrothed."

"Wait, you guys aren't getting married for real for real, are you?" she asked as she flashed a concerned look that made burst into laughter again.

"Viv, please! What do you think this is? It's a publicity stunt designed to save this guy's business," I reminded her. "And, it's the easiest three thousand dollars a week I'll ever make!"

"Holy crap! He's tripling your pay just to get you to go along with this scheme?" she said with admiration and awe. "I am definitely going to have to find out if he has a brother!"

We sat at the café talking until the after work crowd came in and started ordering dinner. Viv offered to come back to the apartment and help me pack, but I told her all I was going to take were a few suitcases of clothes, enough personal items to make it look like I actually lived in Max's place,

and Anna. She hugged me and told me to keep her posted and to send lots of pictures of my new digs.

"I'll invite you over and we'll find out if he does have a brother," I suggested.

"Oooh, excellent idea!" she cried as she hopped into a taxi and headed back to her place in the West Loop. I decided that it was a nice enough evening to walk. I quickly covered the ground between the diner and my apartment and found a moving crew waiting on the front steps.

"Mr. Malin hired us to come move your things, ma'am," one of the men said as I opened the front door and led the crew into the lobby.

"Well, I don't have that much stuff, so you guys are in for a major disappointment," I said. "Oh, and I have a kitten, so do not let her get tucked into one of the boxes by accident!"

"No, ma'am, we don't pack animals, it's not part of the contract," he said as the elevator doors opened and we walked toward my apartment.

#

I was under the impression that I would just be moving enough things in to keep up appearances, but Max had told the movers to pack up everything and bring what I wanted over to his place and store the rest of the things. Max had worked out a deal with my landlord and I'd been

released from the lease agreement. I didn't ask how and I didn't ask what would happen once this charade was over. Instead, for once in my life, I just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

I walked over to Max's apartment with Anna in my arms and a bag of her things over my shoulder. I opened the door and immediately felt intimidated by the opulent surroundings in the lobby. My building had been nice, but this was the kind of building in which incredibly rich people settled down and raised families. I asked the doorman which floor Mr. Malin's condo was on and he led me to the elevator, took my keys from my hand, and slipped the smallest one into a keyhole on the panel labeled Penthouse. He stepped back and nodded as the elevator doors silently slid closed.

"We're definitely moving up, Anna," I said to the small kitten. She had been silent the whole walk over and remained so as the elevator climbed to the top of the building. "Don't be afraid, little one, it's all going to be okay. I promise." Anna let loose with a tiny chirp as the doors to the elevator opened and we stepped out into the most expensive-looking living room I'd ever seen. Everything was white or off-white and all the furniture was square and modern. The windows in the living room stretched floor to ceiling and allowed for a nearly unobstructed view of the entire south side of the city. It was breathtaking, to say the least.

I looked down at Anna and said, "What do you think, little one?" She butted her head against my chin and purred, but made no attempt to get down. "Yeah, me, too." I said as I walked further into the living room toward an open door at the end of a long hallway. I peeked inside and found Max puttering around an island in a kitchen that was larger than the whole apartment I'd just left.

"Lexi, I'm so glad you made it," he smiled as he handed me a glass of red wine and offered me a seat at the counter. "Who's your guest and what can I serve her?"

"This is Anna Karenina," I said. "Anna, Max. Max, Anna. She's going to need her dinner, but I've got it in the bag."

"Well, I've prepared a welcome meal for the humans, so you're welcome to sit at the counter and watch me finish it up or you can wander around and take a look at the place," he offered.

"I think I'll just hang out with you and wait for the official tour," I told him. "I'm kind of afraid that if I wander off in this place, I'll get lost and not be able to find my way back."

"I understand," he nodded. "I felt the same way the first few nights I lived here. I wandered out into the hall looking for a bathroom, wound up in the gym, and didn't know how to get back to my room."

"Why did you buy such a huge place?" I asked. "I mean, it seems like an awful lot of space for someone living alone."

"Yeah, well, it's an investment," he said. "I needed to put some money in property and this was the only place I actually liked. The rest were so stuffy and over done. They reminded me of my grandmother's apartment, and while I love visiting her, I do not want to live in her place."

"I totally understand," I nodded. "I grew up in a house that was warm and wonderful, but I never ever want to own shag carpeting or plaid furniture." Max burst out laughing and Anna chirped at him loudly until he stopped and patted her on the head. Satisfied that she'd been paid her due, she patted my face in an attempt to get me to put her down.

"It's okay, she can wander wherever she likes," Max said as he smiled at the tiny, gray puff on the floor. "But she might want to stick close to the kitchen if she's hungry!" Anna chirped and rubbed against Max's leg as he finished putting the final touches on plates of spaghetti Bolognese and set one down in front of me. I looked around for the bathroom and he pointed toward the back of the kitchen.

"There's one over there in the corner off of the dining area," he said. "I'll put the plates on the table and feed the wee one if you tell me where her food is."

"In this bag," I said as I pulled the pack off of my shoulders and set it on the counter. "I'm sure you'll figure out which dishes belong to the princess."

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, he had set the table and moved the wine and Anna was eating her dinner out of her bowl, which had been placed on top of a special placemat right next to my chair at the table. I smiled at Max and reached down to pat Anna. She didn't even look up at me.

We spent the next hour settling in and getting to know each other in a way that would allow us to live in the same space. As we talked, I realized that Max was even more handsome out of his suits and away from work. He had a wicked sense of humor and an easy laugh, and by the time dinner was over, we were telling childhood stories like old friends. It was comfortable, but I felt the tingle of his presence as we washed and dried the dinner dishes. He was tall and broad, and I could smell a trace of his cologne still lingering on his sweatshirt. Our fingers touched as he passed me the silverware and I felt a shock of electricity slice through my body, leaving in its wake a yearning for his touch.

I looked up at him, but he hadn't seemed to notice the powerful current that had run between us, so I asked, "Is it time for the tour yet?"

"It is," he agreed as his eyes lit up making him look like a little kid on Christmas morning. "Come see the place!"

"Anna, are you coming with us?" I called. Anna chirped and returned to her dinner. "Okay, but don't blame me if you get lost in here!"

With that, I turned and followed Max back down the hallway into the enormous living room, where he began the tour of my new home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Max

I led Lexi through my home, pointing out all of the features in each room and patiently showing her how to operate the lights and the thermostat so she could always be comfortable. I took her through the gym, where I'd installed all the latest fitness machines and weights. There was even an infinity pool tucked in one corner of the room waiting for someone to flip the switch and get in to swim. Lexi's eyes got wider with every new thing I showed her, and I took great pleasure in opening up my home to this beautiful woman.

She'd changed out of her work clothes and was wearing a light summer sundress in a shade of peach that brought out her sun-kissed skin tone. She'd pulled her hair back into a loose braid that for the thousandth time since I'd met her, made me want to reach around and undo it so I could run

my fingers through her auburn tresses. I distracted myself by mentioning the benefits of tanning on the outdoor deck as I opened the door off of the gym and showed her the garden I'd started on the roof. It was a magnificent place to sit and sunbathe, read, or just enjoy dinner and a drink. I'd done that often, but it always felt rather lonely unless Natalia was with me, and even then, there was a solitude that penetrated the space between us.

Showing Lexi these things felt like I was throwing open the door to something new and fresh. She oohed and ahed over every new feature and stopped to admire my herb garden as she took in the view.

"This is incredible, Max," she said as she looked out over the city, marveling at the way the lights were blinking on all over town as the sun set just beyond the outer edges of the city limits. "What a glorious place to live."

"I'm pretty happy here," I agreed. "But it's nice to have a guest to share it with, if I'm honest."

As Lexi turned and smiled at me, my heart jumped. She was so incredibly beautiful. Everything about her was light and free. Lexi Wallace was everything that I was not, and as I thought about this, I felt sad. I wondered how I could drag such a beautiful woman into such a terrible situation with my father. For a moment, I felt a deep sense of guilt and I came close to blurting out the truth, but then I looked west over the city and

remembered what I was striving to leave and I pressed my lips together and continued showing her the place.

We walked back inside down a long hallway lined with modern paintings and prints. Lexi commented on several of them until I pushed open the door to what was to be her room. She stood in the doorway with her mouth open, staring at the room. I told her I'd have the movers unpack the things she decided to bring with her and that my housekeeper would arrange everything so that it looked like a home, rather than a hotel room where she would just pass the time.

To the left of the door was a long dresser with so many drawers that it had been impossible to actually fill them. Along the far wall was a window that reached floor to ceiling and overlooked the four-post bed that sat on the far side of the room, covered in a thick duvet and many plush pillows. There was a sitting area where she could enjoy coffee in the morning or read a book, and on the other side of the sitting area was a large walk-in closet with a dressing table and more space than she'd had in her entire bedroom in the old place.

I watched her closely as she took in all the details, and once she'd processed it all, she walked over to me, rested a hand on my chest, and stood on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. I fought hard not to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her against me. I had no idea if she felt anything

towards me the way I felt about her, but I wasn't going to risk screwing up this deal to find out.

"Max, this is the most beautiful room I've ever seen in my entire life," she whispered as she reached out and took my hand and squeezed it tightly. "I love it. Thank you."

"I'm glad you like it," I said as I gently squeezed her hand, hoping she could read the message I was sending. She turned and looked up at me just as Anna came running down the hallway and jumped on the bed with as ferocious a meow as someone of her size could muster. Lexi dropped my hand and walked over to the kamikaze kitten and picked her up.

"I think Anna will like it here, too," she pronounced as the tiny puffball head batted her chin and purred until she drooled. I laughed at the open display of happiness and told Lexi to follow me. I wanted to show her one more room.

At the end of the hall were two French doors leading into the master bedroom. It ran the entire width of the penthouse and was twice as large as the kitchen on the other end of the place. There was a sitting area with a couch and several chairs positioned around a large fireplace on one end of the room and a king-size, four-post bed covered in a large cranberry-colored duvet on the other. It was the only splash of color in the otherwise gray

room. Lexi nodded as she looked around and noticed my desk in one corner near the soaring window.

"You must love working here," she observed.

"Indeed, I do," I agreed as I watched her take it all in. The room was an architectural masterpiece with the windows starting at the floor level and then curving upward so that one continuous piece of glass softly bent across the roof and made the room feel as if it were completely open to the elements. There was a door off of the side of the bed that led to the private balcony and the Jacuzzi. I'd spent many nights sitting out in the bubbling hot water, looking up at the heavens, trying to figure out the mysteries of the universe.

"That must be a great place to stargaze," Lexi said gesturing at the hot tub. "I'm envious."

"You're welcome to come out and use it anytime you like," I said.

"I just might," she smiled. The smile was followed by a wide yawn, and I realized the tour had taken several hours.

"You must be really tired," I said as I walked back toward her room.

"Do you need anything? Do you want anything?"

"I'm good, Max." She smiled as she reached out and took my hand again. I could feel the soft tips of her fingers gently resting against the palm of my hand and the sensation sent the blood flowing away from my brain

toward my groin. I pulled my hand away quickly as I cleared my throat and ducked my head, trying to hide the erection growing in my shorts.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to let me know, okay?" I said.

"I will, I promise." She walked into her room followed closely by the tiny kitten. Once inside, they both turned and looked at me before Lexi quietly closed her door.

I let out a sigh of relief and hoped that she hadn't noticed anything, then I went back to my room and fired up the computer so that I could purchase more stock as soon as the markets in Moscow opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lexi

After the tour, I went back to my room and thought about how much my life had changed in just one week. One week ago, I had been sobbing as Josh dumped me on his way to Hollywood. Today, I was employed by a nice man who was paying me wages beyond my wildest dreams, and I was sitting my own, luxurious room in one of the most expensive penthouse apartments in the city. Granted, the reason I was here was because I had agreed to a sham marriage in order to help his business, but still, this was a pretty great gig.

"We're doing well, aren't we, Anna?" I said to the kitten who was checking out every inch of the room from ground level. Once she was finished, she jumped up next to me on the sofa and chirped her approval. I patted my leg until I realized that I'd left her litter box and toys in the

kitchen. I quickly hopped up and opened the door. I looked around and then remembered that the kitchen was to my left. I followed the hall back toward the living room, but must have made a wrong turn because I found myself standing in front of a dining room table that had to have been fifteen feet long. I cursed my poor memory and then turned back to retrace my steps. Ten minutes later, I was back in my room with Anna's bag in my hand. I set up her things so that she could easily find them and then called her name, but no fuzz ball came running.

"Anna? Anna, where are you, kitty?" I called quietly. "Little one, don't go hiding on me now!" Still, there was no Anna. I wasn't terribly worried, since there was no way for her to get out of the penthouse without one of us opening a door. But I was worried that she would get lost in the twisting turning rooms and not be able to find her way back to our room. And she was still a baby, so I knew that messes were a distinct possibility. I called her name a few more times, and then retraced my steps back to the kitchen. No luck. "Anna, you are a little stinker!" I whispered into the dark apartment as I tiptoed back to my room. I left the door cracked, hoping that she would simply find her way back. I got ready for bed and crawled under the soft duvet. I called Anna's name one more time before I fell into a deep sleep that sucked me under until the alarm went off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Max

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of purring as a small gray kitten munched my chest and drooled.

"Uh, excuse me," I said as I picked her up and moved her onto the duvet. "You're supposed to be sleeping in the other room, small creature."

Anna looked up at me with her big blue eyes and chirped once before she hopped down off of the bed and headed toward the door. I watched as she slipped out and then grabbed the remote and turned on the morning news.

"We have breaking news this morning; there's been yet another shooting on the west side of the city and we go live to our Action Team reporter Mia Rogers on site. Mia, what are they saying about this shooting?" the anchor said as she turned and looked at the screen where the reporter held a microphone waiting to inform viewers.

"Dana, the Wicker Park Chief of Police, Randall Washington, says that the shootings took place early this morning and involved members of at least one known Russian gang involved in a long-running feud here on the city's west side. Police are not releasing the identities of the two men who were shot, but they say it has all the markings of an execution and that the two men may have known their attackers. This is Mia Rogers reporting for *Action News* on the scene in Wicker Park. Back to you, Dana."

I shut the television off and sat down on the edge of the bed as I tried process what had happened and how I was going to respond. The violence was getting worse. Papa and Kristov were right: We needed to rein in the younger *bratán* or we were going to wind up with an all-out war on our hands. I bent over and rested my elbows on my knees as I held my head in my hands. The last thing I wanted was to be pulled into this war while I was trying to make a deal with Sergei Petrov. If he smelled the mafia anywhere near me, he'd turn and take his money elsewhere. I was between a rock and a hard place with nowhere to go.

"Max, do you want a cup of coffee?" Lexi called as she tapped lightly on the door. I got up, walked over, and opened it.

"Sure, I'd-" I stopped mid-sentence as I looked at Lexi with her nightshirt slipping off one shoulder, her hair pulled into a ponytail, and

holding out a steaming cup of coffee with a smile. I felt the rush of blood leaving my brain.

"I'm sorry Anna woke you up," she said as she held the coffee cup out toward me. "I didn't mean for her to get out of my room. I'll be more careful in the future."

"It's okay." I took the cup wishing it was something much bigger so I could use it to cover my growing erection. "She didn't do any damage, just a little drool on the pillow."

"I'll wash those for you, if you want me to," she offered. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Dressed for business and wearing makeup, Lexi was striking, but without all of the fuss and paint, she was simply beautiful.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I've got a staff who does all of that for me, and they'll be doing it for you, too."

"Oh, right," she said as her smile dimmed. "I know it's weird, but I keep forgetting you have money. Why don't you act like you're rich?"

"It's a long story," I said, sipping from the cup. It tasted awful. I tried to maintain a casual tone as I asked, "How did you make the coffee?"

"I just scooped it out of the jar on the counter and made it the usual way," she said looking at me quizzically. "Why, is there something wrong with it?"

"Well..." I hesitated.

"You hate it," she said reaching for the cup. "Here, let me take that. I'll go make a fresh pot. Maybe that'll be better."

"No, no, no." I gripped the cup of coffee as I moved toward the hallway. "Let me make us a fresh pot."

She followed me into the kitchen where I quickly realized that she'd put the espresso grounds from the ceramic recycling pot into the coffeemaker.

"Oh, I see, well, you used the old grounds from yesterday's coffee to make this pot," I laughed as I dumped the second-time-around grounds back into the recycling container, and then opened the cabinet and took out a tin of beans. "The fresh stuff is here."

"Oh no!" she said. "No wonder it tasted so awful! And you drank it anyway!"

We both dissolved into laughter as I ground the fresh beans and put the pot on to brew before I began making breakfast. Normally I skipped breakfast or ate a protein bar on the way to the store, but this morning, I played the good host and scrambled eggs and browned sausages while Lexi made the toast. We each performed our breakfast duties in silence.

"Did you see that there's been more killings over in Wicker Park?" she asked as she buttered the bread and then neatly sliced the stack on the diagonal.

"I did," I replied. I scooped eggs onto two plates and then placed the sausages beside them.

"What do you think is going on over there?" she asked. "I keep wondering why they're out to kill each other. Is it drugs, do you think? That's what happened to the Vice Lords in the '60s and '70s on the West side. They turned on each other when some of the groups started dealing drugs. The Russians seem kind of barbarian in their approach to dealing with one another, don't you think?"

"Like with any dispute, I'm sure there are reasons behind it that we can't understand," I said, carefully avoiding the weighty answer that I knew I should probably be giving, but wasn't willing to yet. "I'm sure the reporters will figure it out and there will be something about it on the evening news."

"You're probably right," she nodded as she dug into her breakfast and declared it delicious. We talked about the store and Petrov as we ate, then suddenly, Lexi blurted out, "Max, we've got a month to plan our faux wedding! How are we going to do that?"

"Well, we're going to have to break it down into manageable pieces and just pull it all together," I said. "How about you work on the dress, flowers, and cake, and I'll work on the venue and the decorations?"

"But, Max, this is a fake wedding," she said. "Why are we going to go to all the trouble of staging an elaborate wedding if it's just a fake for

Petrov's deal?"

"Because we need an event for all of Petrov's friends and he thinks we're getting married," I said looking at her. "And, because I need this, Lexi. I need this business to succeed."

"Okay, okay, I'm not arguing with you," she said, backing away from the questions. "I just have been trying to figure out my motivation."

"Motivation?"

"Yes, as an actress," she told me. "What's my character's motivation for marrying you?"

"Um, love?" I ventured. Lexi looked at me and burst out laughing.

"Obviously!" she laughed. "I just mean, what's our back story? People are going to ask how we met and how you proposed, you know."

"Can't it just be the one that we already have?" I asked. "You came to work for me and we just fell in love."

"Oh, Max, that's not at all interesting!" she cried. "We need a story, something that will give Petrov's friends a show!"

"I'm not good at show," I said uneasily. "It's not a thing I feel comfortable with."

"Why not?" she asked as she tipped her head, popped the last bit of toast into her mouth, and chewed.

"My father was very strict with my brother and I while we were growing up, and he taught us that we should never ever show off," I said, trying to come as close to the truth as possible without venturing into dangerous territory.

"That must have been some lesson." Lexi reached across the table and patted my hand. "It's okay, we'll think of something that doesn't make you feel vulnerable."

As she looked at me with compassion and kindness, I felt the words welling up in my chest and I wanted nothing more than to spill my whole sordid story and unburden myself, but I knew that if I did, I was risking everything with her. If she thought the Russian mafia gangs were barbarians, then what would she think of my place in the hierarchy and that my father was doing everything he could to try and bring me back to the fold? I swallowed the words and nodded silently.

I would deal with the situation on my own, as I always did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lexi

Max and I rode into work together, talking about business and the wedding. I was worried about what his family would say about this quick union since they lived in Chicago. My parents were missionaries who moved to a different country every year or two, and who I had rarely seen since I'd come back to the States to attend school when I was a teenager. I wouldn't even bother to tell them what had happened until it was all over and the store was fully funded, and then I'd tell them the story as though it was one of my greatest roles.

"So, I'm going to schedule dress fittings and cake tastings for next week," I said as I marked my to do list in my planner. "Oh, I forgot! I've got my audition this afternoon; do you mind if I take off a little early for it?"

"Do I have a choice?" he asked.

"Well, you are my boss, so I guess you could veto my request." I shrugged, then grinned. "But as my fake fiancée, that might not be the smartest move."

"Very well, if you insist," Max sighed dramatically, making me laugh. He was good at finding the humor in even the most serious situation, and I appreciated it because I could tell that he had a lot on his mind.

"Are Petrov's lawyers coming in with the paperwork today?" I asked.

"This morning when we open," he nodded. "We'll go over everything, then I'll sign the papers and they'll transfer the initial influx of cash."

"What are you going to do first?" I asked. "With the money?"

"Pay you," he grinned.

"Very funny, Mr. Moneybags." I smiled as I lightly swatted his shoulder. "I'm the least of your expenses."

"Yes, but you are one of my most valuable investments," he said as he looked at me with his ice blue eyes. "Therefore, I pay you first."

"I see," I nodded, unable to look away. His eyes were full of all the things I knew he wasn't telling me, and while I wanted to try and pry it out of him, I knew better than to hound him. Max Malin was not a man who could be hounded into disclosing things he wasn't ready to talk about – and his silent stoicism was also extremely sexy. I finally looked away and consulted my planner as I told him, "I'll be leaving around three, okay?"

"No problem, I think I can handle things for a couple of hours," he nodded as he looked at the screen of his phone and swore quietly under his breath. When he didn't explain, I knew better than to ask.

Petrov's lawyers arrived not long after we opened the store, and I sold six pieces while Max was locked up in the back room with them. It seemed that Sergei Petrov had told every single person he knew about his experience at the store; they were flooding in looking for one-of-a-kind pieces that they could give or wear. The men were charming and eager to find something that would please their wives, so they trusted me to help them pick out just the right piece of jewelry and then wrap it up in a showy package that would garner praise and appreciation.

I enjoyed it almost as much as helping the women who came into the store. They were elegant, well-dressed women who obviously spent their days taking care of their personal appearances, and it showed. The beautiful and brightly lacquered nails on their hands enhanced the beauty of every ring tried on, and their impeccably done hair and makeup made every set of earrings sparkle and shine brilliantly. It was like having my own, personal accessory models, and they not only tried things on, these women bought what they loved. Money was no object.

By the time Max emerged from the back room to escort the lawyers to the front of the store, I had sold over \$50,000 worth of merchandise. Max

looked over the display cases and made notes on what he needed to replace and what had not yet sold. Then, he asked me if I'd call and order lunch for us both while he made a few phone calls. A half an hour later, I brought him a plate of spicy Indian food from the restaurant down the street and put a cold beer in front of him.

"I'm working," he said as he looked from the beer to me.

"Yes, but you just spent the morning locked in a room with lawyers who probably came close to boring you to death." I smiled. "You deserve a reward for surviving."

"You're a great fake fiancée; you know that, don't you?" he laughed.

"I'm doing my best to be nice to the boss who finds me so valuable," I said quietly. Max looked up at me and for a moment, I seriously thought about leaning down and kissing those soft, full lips. It wouldn't have taken much for me to do it, but good sense won out and I cleared my throat before asking, "Need anything else right now?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you, Lexi," he said as he dug into the plate of chicken tikka and then drank deeply from the bottle I'd left on his desk. "I'll come out as soon as I'm done and give you a break."

"No worries," I said as I tried very hard to calm the storm that was brewing inside and tamp down the ache I felt every time I was near him.

"I'm good. All good."

After lunch, we worked together on the sales floor until around three o'clock, when I packed up my things and told him I was heading out for my audition. I double and triple checked that I had my script and made sure that I knew exactly where I was going before I headed out the door.

"Break a leg, fiancée," Max deadpanned as I pushed the door open.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Malin," I smiled as I stepped out into the sunshine and headed toward yet another possible future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Max

Without Lexi in the showroom, the store felt empty, and I was rather surprised by how such a small person could fill such a large space. I busied myself polishing the display cases and making phone calls from the sales floor. Just before closing, I looked up to see a familiar face enter.

"Hello, Papa," I said warily as I watched my father scan the store and then look back at me. There was something dark in his eyes, and I knew from experience that he was either angry or, worse, drunk.

"Maksimka!" my father called as he walked toward me. "Why are you staying away from me?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked as I stood still behind a display case that I'd been polishing. "I just came and saw you a few days ago."

"Come give your Papa a big hug, Maksimka!" he bellowed. He was drunk, and now I knew how to deal with him, but it was going to be tricky. One wrong move and there would be hell to pay. I walked over and wrapped my arms around him hugging him tightly.

"I'm glad you could come visit the store, Papa," I lied.

"No you're not, don't lie to me, Maksim," he said in a voice that made me recoil. He was angry with me already and nothing I could do would placate him. I was going to have to weather whatever it was he was here to deliver and then walk away. I glanced around the showroom and sent up a silent prayer that he wouldn't do anything violent. "*Moj syn, moj syn, moj syn*, what are you doing here? What are you doing in a place like this? This is the place of the rich boys who have no balls, the weak and soft. What is a strong boy like you doing here, Maksim?"

I knew he was baiting me, so I held back and listened. He wanted something, this much I knew already, but specifically what he wanted, I had no idea. I knew that if I listened, he'd eventually tell me.

"Ah, this is beautiful, very Russian," he said as he walked around the showroom, peering into display cases and clicking his tongue. "You've picked out the best of the best, haven't you? Very nice. Your mother loved these kinds of pieces. She always asked me to find her favorites."

My heart started racing as he began speaking about my mother. This was a conversation I did not want to have because I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my cool if he started spewing his self-righteous tale of love and destiny. In my mind, he was responsible for my mother's death, and nothing he could ever say would change that fact, but I wasn't about to challenge him on it when he was drunk.

"Yes, Papa," I said.

"What? You don't believe me?" he yelled. "I always brought your mother a beautiful piece of jewelry when I traveled!"

"Yes, Papa," I repeating the phrase I'd learned was the only way to walk the line with him when he was like this. When I was fifteen, I'd made the mistake of trying to buck him when he was drunk, and he'd given me a lesson that left a scar across the side of my abdomen where he'd sliced me with a knife when I'd given him a flip response to a question that he'd considered serious in his drunken state. After that, I'd learned simply to respond with a simple "Yes, Papa," and never look him in the eye.

"You're such a wise guy, you know," he said as he leaned on a display case tapping the glass with his thick, dirty fingertip. "You think you can escape into this life? You think you're so much better than your brother and I, don't you? You move away from the neighborhood, buy a place in the rich

part of town, and open this shop thinking you can escape and avoid the *bratán*. But you can't, Maksim."

"Yes, Papa," I said warily, eyeing his shoes and dirty work pants.

"Don't YES PAPA ME!" he bellowed as he slammed his fist down into the display case, causing the jewelry inside to rattle and shift. The cases were made of shatterproof glass – a safety measure that I was now very glad I'd invested in. "Don't give me the wise-guy yes Papa bullshit, Maksim! I'm your father and I deserve respect!"

"I understand, Papa," I said, trying to avoid enraging him further, but he wasn't having it tonight and he flew across the floor and launched himself at me, fists flying as he sought out a way to let go of the rage and pain. I stepped back and he fell on the floor in front of me at my feet. "Papa, please..." I said as I stretched out my hand to try and help him up.

"Don't!" he growled as he pushed himself up off of the floor and stood staring at me for a long time. "You need to come home, Maksimka. This war is growing worse by the day and we have no one who can lead."

"You are leading, Papa," I said, watching him warily.

"I'm not leading anymore, Maksim. I'm an old man and the young boys don't respect the old ways; they need a new leader. A leader who knows how to speak their language," he said in a voice that was both resigned and rebellious. "I am part of the old country; I don't know what they know. I

don't run in the streets like they do or do the things they do. We didn't have cell phones and technology when I ran the *vory v zakone* when we first came to this country. Everything had changed, Maksim. Everything. It's time for new."

"Three months, Papa," I said, knowing that I had to stick to my guns or he would break me down and ruin any chance I had of getting out for good. I felt sad for my father, but there was nothing I could do to change what he'd been through or where he was headed. He'd made his own bed, now it was time for him to lie in it.

"We may not have three months, Maksim," my father replied quietly. "I know you think I'm trying to trick you or trap you into coming back, but the truth is that we don't have a lot of time. They young ones are killing each other in the streets and we need to stop it. We need someone who can negotiate a truce and keep the boys under an iron fist so that they don't run the business into the ground."

"Papa, you promised me three months," I said in a tone that gave away neither anger nor sympathy. "I'm going to do this for three months and then if I can't earn my first million, I will sell the shop and come back."

"You are a hard boy, Maksimka," my father said. "You've always been a hard boy, not like Kristov. He's tough, but he's not hard and hard is what we need to maintain a hold on the business."

"I understand, Papa," I nodded. "Three months."

My father nodded and then turned and slowly walked toward the front door. When he reached it, he stopped and turned around to look at me.

"I know you think I am responsible for your mother's death, Maksim," he said quietly as he shook his head sadly. "I'm not. I loved your mother than life itself. I would never have hurt her, but whether or not you choose to believe that is always up to you. I'm just your father." And with that, he turned and walked out the door.

When it clicked behind him, I quickly walked over and turned the lock so that no one else could come in and then I went back to the office and sat with my head in my hands until the pounding in my chest slowed and my hands were no longer shaking.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THIRTY

Lexi

When I exited the theater after my audition, Max's driver was waiting for me. In the backseat was a post-audition kit: a cold bottle of water, a small box of Vosges chocolates, and a bouquet of pink roses that smelled like they'd just been cut. Among the roses, Max had tucked a note that said, *"Celebrating your success tonight! Dinner on me! -M"*

I laughed and inhaled deeply before popping a dark chili chocolate into my mouth and savoring its bittersweet flavor. I replayed the audition as the car moved toward home and knew I had nailed the part, at least as far as I could tell. The director had told me that they wanted to call me back the next day for another audition with the actor who would play George. It felt like everything was going my way for a change.

It was dark by the time I arrived home, and as I slipped the key into the elevator and turned it, I sighed knowing that soon I would be able to shed the dress and heels I'd been wearing since early this morning and relax. When the elevator doors slid open, I gasped.

Max had prepared the place for my arrival, but he was nowhere to be seen. In the living room there was a bucket of ice with a bottle of expensive champagne chilling in it and a note that read, "*Sip me now,*" along with another bouquet of roses, this time coral, and an enormous gift box wrapped in gold foil, tied with a shiny black bow. The card on it said, "*Open me now.*"

I set my champagne down and opened the box as directed. In it was a gorgeous maxi dress in the same shade of coral as the roses. The note on the card inside the box read, "*Wear me now.*" I laughed as I grabbed my glass of bubbly and walked to my bedroom, where I quickly stripped down and stepped into the shower. Once I'd scrubbed off the day, I dried myself, smoothed on a lightly scented lotion that made me smell like summer, and slipped into the beautiful dress.

I appraised myself in the mirror and smiled as I looked at my reflection from all angles and realized that Max had done the impossible: He'd picked out a dress that fit me like a glove. It wrapped around me to create a deep v between my breasts and was tightly fitted so that it hugged them and made

them look bigger than they were. The waist was fitted with light layers of fabric cascading down to the ground around my feet, where it swirled like a cloud around my ankles. The effect was magical, and I grinned at myself as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, pinning my damp hair up into a loose pile on top of my head before fastening the necklace that Max had given me on my first day of work around my neck.

I stood back and laughed. I looked and felt like a princess going to the ball when, in fact, I was only heading into the kitchen for dinner. It didn't matter. What mattered was that I looked and felt beautiful, and I had Max to thank for that. I quickly scanned the room for Anna, and when I didn't find her, I walked down the hall to check Max's room. There, in the center of his huge bed, was my tiny gray kitten fast asleep. I left the door cracked open and walked back out past the living room into the kitchen.

"Max?" I called out as I stuck my head around the corner. There was no response, but on the counter I found a plate with four bacon wrapped figs dripping with a mystery sauce. Next to the plate was a note that read, *"Eat one now and bring the rest to the balcony."* I popped a fig in my mouth and was overwhelmed by the delicious combination of sweet and savory flavors, then I grabbed the plate and walked out to the balcony.

"Max?" I called again before I saw him standing against the far railing, his back to the city with the lights outlining his body. He was wearing light-

colored shirt and pants, which set off his toned body. His hair was down and messy, the way I liked it, and was blowing in the light breeze that passed over the upper floor of the building. He held out a glass of wine and smiled as walked toward me.

"You look stunning," he told me as he offered the wine. I took it as I smiled up at him. "But then, I think you'd look stunning no matter what you put on."

"You're such a charmer, Mr. Malin," I said as I held his gaze. There was something different about him, something softer. I wasn't sure what had happened while I was away for the afternoon, but I was pretty sure I liked it.

"How was the audition?" he asked as he took the plate of figs from my hand and set it on the table he'd set up outside. It was covered in a pristine white cloth and set with what appeared to be dinner. He motioned for me to sit down as he pulled out my chair and helped me get seated. Then, he took his place across the small table and lifted the silver covers on each of our plates. I inhaled sharply as I saw the perfectly prepared individual paellas full of rice, vegetables, and a wide array of seafood.

"Did you make this?" I asked, stunned at the beauty of the dish and its intoxicating scent.

"I did, indeed," he smiled. "I'm more than just a ruthless businessman, you know."

"I never said you were ruthless!" I protested laughing. "And, I knew you could whip up a simple meal, but this?"

"I am a man of many talents, fiancée," he said. I looked across the table and saw that he was watching me closely with those mesmerizing blue eyes, and I smiled as I dropped my gaze to the plate in front of me, picked up my fork, and began to eat.

"Apparently, gourmet chef skills are included in those skills," I said as the delicious flavors exploded in my mouth. "This is delicious. Where did you learn to make something like this?"

"Thank you, my Babi taught me to cook, and she encouraged me to experiment with lots of different types of foods," he said as he chewed. "I particularly like Mediterranean food because it's light and healthy, and it looks so beautiful on the plate. But enough about me, you didn't tell me about the audition."

"It went quite well, I think," I said as I continued eating. "They want me to come back tomorrow and read with the actor who will be playing George."

"That's good!" He smiled and then suddenly, his face fell. "Wait, I'm going to have to let you go early again?"

"That's correct," I nodded, hoping that he wouldn't get mad about it. Then, I grinned at him, "I mean, I could ask for the whole day off, but I won't."

"A whole day off?" he said incredulously. I caught a glimpse of the smile that flitted across his lips and decided that two could play at this game.

"Yes, most normal people get two days off per week," I lectured in a prissy tone. "I haven't asked for any days off yet, so I think you could grant me an afternoon. I mean, unless I need to go to the labor board and file a complaint or something."

"You are one smooth negotiator, lady!" Max burst out laughing and dropped his fork on his plate.

"Thank you, I think," I said as I grinned and kept eating.

"Yes, you can have tomorrow afternoon off, but don't make it a habit," he warned. "We've got a lot of work to do between sales and the wedding plans, and I need you in the store."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" I said as I offered up a mock salute. A dark look crossed Max's face, but was quickly replaced by a smile as he offered me more wine.

We spent the rest of the meal discussing our wedding plans and setting the date so that we could choose various vendors and order things like

flowers and the cake. There was a part of me that felt a little confused as we talked about guests and the venue, but I quickly swept my confusion aside as I reminded myself that this was a business deal and that my role was to play the bride. We decided on the first weekend in August, which gave us less than two months to plan the entire event. Max wondered if we shouldn't hire a wedding planner, but I nixed the idea, telling him that I didn't think it was the best idea to involve an outsider in planning a faux wedding.

"Besides, we don't need the added expense," I tossed out.

"Lexi, I don't know how many times I'm going to have to tell you this, but money is not obstacle here," he said as he spooned up the last of his meal.

"I keep forgetting that, sorry," I said, shaking my head. "Why don't you act more like a billionaire?"

"I can't," he said as he cast his eyes downward. "It's not something I can do. Just try to understand that."

"I'm sorry," I repeated quietly. I stood up and started gathering the plates to take them back to the kitchen.

"Lexi, stop, I have a staff who will do that for us," he said, resting his hand on my arm.

"I'm never going to get used to this," I sighed as I set the plates down and followed him to the far end of the balcony, where we stood looking out

over Lake Michigan and enjoying the cool evening breeze.

"Max, why are you doing this?" I asked. We were standing so close, I could feel the heat radiating off of him. He smelled of spices and musk, and I wanted very badly to lean against him and feel his arm around my waist.

"Doing what?" he asked.

"Why are you setting up a fake wedding with a complete stranger, instead of marrying a woman you actually love?"

"Oh, that," he replied quietly. "It's a long complicated story, and I don't want to bore you with it."

"I seriously doubt you could ever bore me," I said as I turned and looked up at his profile. His jaw was flexing as he stared out at the water and I knew he was trying to decide what to tell me. I didn't push; instead, I lifted my arm and lightly rested my hand against his cheek. He leaned into my touch for a few moments before he turned and looked down at me.

"You are so incredibly beautiful," he said as he reached around behind me and slipped his fingers into my hair. He quickly located the few pins I'd used to pile my hair on top of my head and with nimble fingers, he quickly pulled them out, causing my hair to fall down around my shoulders. "I've wanted to do that since the first day."

"Why didn't you?" I whispered.

"I wasn't sure you'd let me." He leaned closer running his fingers through my hair until he was cupping the back of my head and could pull me close enough to feel his breath on my cheek. "I also wanted to do this."

Then, Max Malin lightly brushed his lips across mine before he pulled me to him and kissed me, and I melted.

CHAPTER THRITY-THIRTY ONE

Max

All through dinner, I'd fought back the urge to touch Lexi, and now as we stood on the balcony high above the city, I stopped fighting. I could feel the softness of her body through the fabric of her dress as I pulled her tightly against me. I ran my fingers through her hair and cradled the back of her head as I kissed her deeply, afraid that at any moment, she would stop and push me away.

Instead, Lexi wrapped her arms around my neck and began moaning softly as I slowly ran my tongue over her lower lip before gently nipping it with my teeth. I heard her sigh as her tongue darted out from between her lips and found mine. She teased me as the kiss intensified and my hands began to wander.

"Max," she whispered as she pulled back from my mouth. "Are we...is this..."

"I've wanted this from the moment I first laid eyes on you," I told her as I looked into her eyes and caressed her cheek with my fingertips. She was looking up at me and her eyes sparkled with desire as she nodded and then pulled me back down into another deep kiss. With my fingers, I traced a path down the deep v in her dress and was rewarded with a soft moan as she shivered. I was torn between wanting to draw things out for as long as possible and wanting to tear off her clothes and feel every inch of her naked skin pressed against my body.

Afraid of moving too quickly and frightening her, I scooped her up in my arms and carried her over to the large chaise lounge in the far corner of the deck. I gently laid her down and starting at her feet, began pushing the silky layers of fabric up her body exposing her skin with every inch. I stopped to run my tongue up the inside of her leg and was rewarded with a deep sigh before I continued my ascent. I was surprised to see that she wasn't wearing anything under the dress, and I smiled at her as she sat up and raised her arms so I could pull it up over her head leaving her completely bare.

"You're exquisite," I whispered as I leaned forward and kissed her neck. "And, I want to explore every inch of you. Slowly and deliberately."

"Max," she moaned as she ran her fingers through my hair. She ran them across my shoulders before whispering, "I want you...please."

She reached down and grabbed the bottom of my shirt and tugged until I was forced to lift my arms up so she could remove it. She gasped as she leaned forward and ran her lips over the skin of my bare chest. I could feel my own need building as my shaft swelled inside my pants. Lexi dropped one hand and began massaging it through the fabric as I grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her head back so I could kiss her harder.

As I held her hair in one hand, I ran the other across her breasts, stopping to tease each of her nipples into erect points as our tongues darted and danced. She moaned into the kiss as she unzipped my pants, slipped her hand inside them, and began stroking. I groaned as I felt her fingers close around my shaft and begin to squeeze as she slid her finger across the slippery tip, where evidence of my desire was already leaking out.

She teased me until I whispered, "Two can play at this game, lady," and ran my hand down her body until I reached the center of her need and slid my hands between her thighs. I leaned back a little and held her gaze as I lightly stroked her outer lips. She squeezed me tighter and stroked a little harder. In response, I dipped one finger between her lips and massaged the wet, velvety folds between them. She gasped, and then let go so that she could bring her hand up to her lips and run her tongue across the palm,

coating it in her saliva before reaching back down to grasp my turgid erection. Now, it was my turn to gasp as she began stroking me with her slippery wet hand.

"You're evil," I grinned.

"You like it," she replied with a wicked smile as she stroked a little harder. For a moment, I lost track of what I was doing as I gave in to the rhythm of her hand. My fingers were still buried between her legs and her warmth reminded me I still had an edge. I slid two fingers down to her wet, waiting entrance and then slowly slid them all the way in, earning a long low moan in the process.

"I told you, two can play this game," I whispered into her lips as I leaned forward and kissed her again. I followed her rhythm as I stroked her inner walls and together, we drove each other to the edge of desire. I wrapped my arm around her lower back and held her firmly as I slid my fingers in and out again and again, applying my thumb on the swollen flesh of her clitoris. She moaned loudly and picked up her pace as she stroked me harder and faster. I groaned as I felt the wave of orgasm approaching and I stroked her harder, trying to bring her under with me.

"Max, Max, Max," she panted into my mouth as I pressed my fingers deeper into her and stroked her harder and faster. I could feel her tensing around my hand and I wanted to feel her go all the way and cede control. I

tried to hold back as I felt the warm slick pressure of her hand sliding up and down on my shaft, but I knew that I wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer.

"Do it, Lexi, let go and do it for me," I whispered into her lips. "I want to see your beautiful face as you let go and climax for me. Do it for me, Lexi. I need it."

The words pushed her over the edge, and I felt her clamp down on my hand as she screamed and thrust her hips up to meet my fingers. The sound of her orgasming set off my own release and I groaned loudly as I let go and climaxed with her. She continued gripping my shaft as she pumped her hips against my hand, and I throbbed as I felt the last of my release dripping from the tip.

"What was that?" she whispered many minutes later when we'd both regained our breath. She groaned softly as I pulled my fingers from between her legs and then lay down next to her on the chaise. I pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her as I closed my eyes and breathed in her scent.

"Whatever it was," I said as I stroked her skin. "I want more of it, much more."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lexi

As Max held me, I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heart beating. It was strong and steady, and as I lay next to him, feeling his arms encircling me, I wondered if I had just made a huge mistake. I worked for him, and now, I'd crossed a line and become something entirely different. The question was what that was.

I shifted a little and pulled back so that I could look at his face. When he didn't move, I realized he had fallen asleep on the chaise. I shook my head as I extracted myself from his embrace and then covered him with a blanket draped over the end of the lounge. It was warm enough to sleep outside and the sky looked clear, so I knew he would be fine. I leaned over and lightly kissed his cheek, then stood up, grabbed my dress and wrapped it around me as I walked back to my room. I looked for Anna, but when I

couldn't find her, I assumed she was still fast asleep in Max's room, so I left the door cracked and went to bed.

I lay there in the darkness thinking about everything that had happened and my head spun with the mix of images and sensations. I'd landed a second audition for a major role, and then, I'd ended up having sex on the balcony of my boss's penthouse with him. As I turned it over and over again, I feel a growing unease in the pit of my stomach.

Rationally, I knew that there was no way on earth that a man like Max Malin saw me as a potential – anything. I was a young actress he'd hired to help him build his business, and the fact that he and I had hooked up was simply a bonus in his estimate. I was a support system, in much the same way I'd been for Josh, and I held back a small sob as I thought about where that had gotten me.

I began replaying all of the interactions and conversations Max and I had had since I'd begun working for him. I looked at it all through the lens of being the hired help and flinched as I recalled that he had people who washed his sheets and did his dishes. He wouldn't flinch at having a sales girl who performed other duties, and the shame of having been willing to believe that there might be something else to it all made my cheeks burn. I was a fool. Just like with Josh.

The problem was that I'd bought my own act. Max had hired me to play a role and I'd played it so well that I'd forgotten it was a role. I'd forgotten that it wasn't real. And yet, I couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't at least a tiny bit of real mixed in. He couldn't have done what he'd done had there not be some kind of real feelings. The memory of his soft lips pressed against mine, and the sensations that his hands had drawn out of my body were real to me. They were still very real. And, the fact that I wanted more of him proved that what I'd felt was real.

I shook my head as I thought about how a man like that didn't want for female company and that I was fooling myself if I thought he'd choose me, an out-of-work actress, over some rich socialite who understood his world and what it would take to live in it. In Max's business, there was no room for this girlish romantic fantasy. He had an empire to build and I was simply a stepping-stone in the process.

The longer I thought about it, the more agitated I became as I compared the situation to the one I'd just left. Josh had used me, too, and then discarded me when I became a burden, and he didn't have anywhere near the resources or connections that Max Malin had. And, I'd been with Josh for over five years! If he could so quickly discard me after that, then there was really nothing stopping Max from doing it after a few weeks or months, and I wasn't going to become disposable again.

I breathed deeply as I fought back the tears of rejection and told myself that I didn't have time for all of this personal drama, anyway. I had an audition for a major role scheduled and a major part to land. This role with Max would be over once we'd figured out an ending to this fake wedding and generated publicity for his business. After that, I would be on my own again, me and Anna, and I needed to prepare for what would happen. Max Malin had no intention of becoming a permanent part of my life, so I needed to stop mooning around like a love struck schoolgirl pretending like he did.

I set my jaw as I pulled the covers up tightly around me. I was not going to allow myself to be blindsided twice – not when I could see the ending from a mile away.

CHAPTER THRITY-THREE

Max

I woke up alone on the chaise lounge the next morning with the sun just beginning to peek over the horizon and light up the sky. For a moment, I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there, then I smiled as the memory of the night before came flooding back. I turned over expecting to find Lexi fast asleep next to me. I frowned when I saw that the space was empty and wondered if she'd awoken early and gone in to get breakfast started.

"Lexi?" I called as I opened the balcony door and went inside. There was no response, so I headed back toward my bedroom, wondering if she'd already started getting ready for work. "Lexi? Are you up?"

The door to her bedroom was cracked open, so I peeked inside and found her sound asleep in her own bed with Anna curled up next to her on the pillow. The kitten opened one eye and looked at me, then stretched a

little and laid one paw on her owner's head and went back to sleep. I backed up and closed the door, wondering if I'd imagined the night before.

I walked back to the balcony, saw the remnants of dinner still sitting on the table, and frowned. I wracked my brain trying to figure out what had happened. The last thing I remembered was stroking her hair and kissing her before I drifted off to sleep. Whatever had happened after that was a mystery to me. I shrugged as I went into the kitchen and began making coffee. I wanted to get a run in before it got to late, so I went into the bedroom, changed into my running gear, and headed out toward the lake to clear my head.

As I ran, I tried to push Lexi out of my mind, but her face and the feel of her body pressed against mine was impossible to completely ignore. I shifted my thoughts to what lay ahead of me. I had to finish my order so that we'd have all the pieces we needed to refill the displays, then Lexi and I had to decide on a venue and decorations for the wedding. After last night's dinner, the planning felt a little odd. I'd felt something with her that I'd never felt before – some kind of deep need that was satisfied only by her.

I shook my head as I hit mile three and then turned around and headed back home. Lexi would be up by now and wondering where I'd disappeared to, and I didn't want her to worry. I grinned as I caught myself thinking

these rather domestic thoughts and then ran a little faster to get back to where I felt like I belonged.

When I entered the kitchen, sweaty and still a bit out of breath, I was met with a chilly silence. "Good morning, Lexi!" I called. She turned and nodded, then turned back to the paper that lay in front of her and kept reading. Now, I was truly confused. "How are you this morning?" I asked.

"I'm well, thank you for asking," she replied in a crisp tone. She was wearing a robe, but her hair was pulled up into a tight bun at the base of her neck and no wisps were going to escape. "How was your run?"

"It was productive," I said as I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down across the table from her. When she didn't look up, I asked, "What's new in the news?"

"Gas prices have dropped," she said reading off the headlines. "CPS is going to implement stringent budget measures next year, and there's been another shooting in Wicker Park."

"What does it say about the shooting?" I asked, feeling the dread begging to rise.

"It says that a member of a known mafia gang thought to be run by Vladimir Malinchenko was gunned down outside Malinchenko's bar Ursus this morning," she summarized. "They called the victim one of the *vory v zakone*. I wonder what that means. I'm going to have to look that up."

"Thieves-in-law," I said without thinking. "It means they're part of the same gang."

"Oh, that's interesting. So, it's kind of like brotherhood or something," she observed.

"No, that's *bratán*," I said as I looked at the screen of my phone, hoping to find a message from Kristov. There was nothing there, and I quickly brought up his number and dialed it.

"How do you know so much about all of this?" she asked.

"It's an interest of mine since I deal with the Russian community," I said, carefully covering my tracks as I waited for Kristov to answer. I grew concerned when the ringing went to voicemail. There had never been a time when Kristov hadn't picked up his phone for me. There had been times he'd even answered while he was having sex with his girlfriend of the moment. I'd scolded him for being indiscreet, and he'd been unfazed as he told me that they found it sexy. I dialed a second time and it went straight to voicemail. Something was definitely not right.

"Are you okay, Max?" Lexi asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, fine," I said as I thought about what I needed to do next. I couldn't call Papa because I didn't want to alert him to what was going on with Kristov if he didn't already know. I quickly made the decision to get dressed, drive over to Kristov's apartment, and find out where he was.

"Look, I need to run an errand this morning. Can you get the store up and running without me?"

"Sure, no problem," she said in a flat tone. "Just don't forget that I have the call-back audition this afternoon."

"Right, right," I replied as I downed the rest of my coffee and headed to the shower. "I'll be back this afternoon in time for you to get to the audition."

"I hope so," she muttered under her breath. I couldn't figure out why she was upset with me, but I didn't have the time to figure it all out. Lexi would have to wait while I dealt with the more immediate problem of my brother.

I just hoped that he was, in fact, still a problem.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lexi

I opened the store at nine on the dot and was happy to see Mrs. Zakhrov walk through the door ten minutes later. She was looking for a new statement piece that she'd heard about, but had never seen.

"My dear, the Star of Russia is the piece of pieces this season!" she cried as she browsed the cases. "I must have it. Have you heard anything about it?"

"No, I haven't yet, but I'll ask Mr. Malin," I replied, pulling out a large aquamarine pendant on a thick gold chain and handing it to her to try on while I pulled out the matching earrings. "If anyone knows where it is and how to find it for you, it would be him."

"Oh, my dear, this is lovely" she said admiring herself from all angles in the mirror. I handed her the drop earrings and watched as she threaded

them through the holes in her ears and let them hang. The set looked lovely on her with her chestnut hair and violet eyes. "Oh yes, I like this very much. I will take them both."

"Wonderful, they deserve to go home with someone who will make them look as lovely as you do," I smiled. I took the pieces and began wrapping them up.

"You and Mr. Malin are such lovely people," she smiled. "How on earth did you meet?"

"We shared some common interests," I smiled serenely as I wrapped her packages. "Max always says it was love at first sight, but I tend to think it was lust, followed by deeper feelings."

"It's always that way for men, dear," she laughed. "They see what they want and then they find a way to tell themselves a story that allows them to go after it and get it."

"Do you really think that's the case, Mrs. Zakhrov?" I asked, genuinely curious to hear what a woman with her experience and years of marriage behind her had to say.

"Oh yes, I absolutely do," she exclaimed. "I think that women are much pickier than men, but that when men find what it is they want, they lock on and decide that's it. My husband pursued me for two years before I even agreed to go out with him!"

"Why?" I gasped. "I mean, why did you make him wait two years?"

"I wasn't sure I liked him." She shrugged. "I was in college and I needed time to finish my degree, and I knew that if I said yes, I'd most likely end up married with children, but no degree. So, I held him off until I got what I needed and by that time, I'd seen what a wonderful man he was, so I said yes. We were married two months after our first date."

"That's such a romantic story!" I said, admiring her for her strength of her convictions.

"No, not particularly," she said. "I love my husband, but he's never been one of those flowers and romance men. But by the time I married him, I already knew that and had accepted that I was marrying a hard worker who would always make sure I had a roof over my head and food on my table. I could live without the flowers and romance if I wasn't hungry."

"That sounds so mercenary."

"You young people are so foolish these days," she laughed. "You think that love is like the movies. You think that men are going to come, sweep you up off of your feet, and carry you away to live in a castle. That's not how it all works, *golubshka*. Real life is sticking it out through the difficult times and finding a way to love each other, even when there's no romance."

"But what about before the marriage?" I asked. She obviously knew what she was talking about and I intended to get an answer to the Max

question once and for all. "How do you know if he really loves you?"

"He'll be very clear about it," she smiled. "Watch him and he'll show you everything you need to know. Actions, *golubshka*, actions speak louder than words."

I nodded as I finished wrapping up her packages and carefully tucked them into one of our signature black bags. If action was a good indication of how a man felt, then Max's actions were clear as a bell. He didn't love me. Maybe he didn't even like me. He was just using me.

"*Spaseebo*, Mrs. Zakhrov." I smiled as I handed her the bag.

"If you ask me, *golubshka*, that man is head over heels in love with you," she smiled mischievously. "But no one ever asks me; I'm just an old woman who talks too much and loves to shop!"

"Oh, you're much more than that, Mrs. Zakhrov, much more than that!" I laughed as she walked out the door.

I spent the rest of the morning cleaning and shining the cases and jewelry in them. It was a mindless task, so I let my brain run as I polished each piece and then replaced it in the case.

Around noon, I called down to Indira's and ordered lunch for both Max and me. He hadn't called to say when he was returning, but I bet on the fact that he'd probably not had lunch and would be hungry by the time he got in. I also knew that if he cut it too close, he wouldn't be able to go out and get

something because I was scheduled to be at my audition by four. I ate my lunch standing by the back office, watching the front door, and silently hoping that Max made it back in time for me to make the audition on time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Max

I drove by the bar to see if Kristov was out front before I headed over to his place. He often spent part of the day simply being a presence on the street, and Papa encouraged it so that rival gang members would think twice about coming into the bar and causing trouble. It was also Kristov's way of thumbing his nose at the rival gangs who thought they might be strong enough to usurp his place in the community. There was no activity outside Ursus, so I told my driver to head to my brother's house.

Kristov had been reserved with the money he'd received from my mother. He'd bought a two-story, red brick house on Evergreen so that he could be near Papa and the bar, but not too close that everyone would know his business. Papa did anyway, but my brother said that was because the *bratán* reported back to Papa on a regular basis in order to curry favor.

Unlike me, Kristov didn't care. He liked being accounted for and he said that the fact that Papa always knew where he was or what he was doing made him feel safer.

I called him again from the car as we pulled up outside his house. His red Mustang was parked on the street and there were several of the young *bratán* milling about outside the gate. I got out of the car and approached them warily.

"Hey, where's Kristov?" I asked.

"Who wants to know?" a young boy with a shaved head asked as he eyed me suspiciously. His buddy hit him and whispered something I couldn't hear. The boy looked at me with wide eyes and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Malinchenko. I didn't recognize you."

"It's okay, I wasn't expecting to come down here this morning so I didn't dress the part," I said with a grim smile. "Where's Kristov?"

"We don't know, sir," the boy said. "We haven't seen him all morning. Someone said he went to meet with Dementyev this morning."

"Dementyev? Aleksander Dementyev?" I shouted at the boys. "What the fuck does he think he's doing? That son of a bitch!"

The boys shrunk back from my rage as I yanked open the gate and stormed up the walk. I pounded on the front door yelling, "Kristov, you'd

better open up this damn door right this minute or I am going to break it down and haul your sorry ass out on to the street!"

When I got no response, I stalked around to the back door and tried to peer into the kitchen. There was no movement inside the house, and my heart dropped to my stomach as I thought about what this might mean. I walked back to the front and addressed the boys.

"You two need to run over to Ursus and get my father, do you understand me?" I said in a grave voice. "You need to bring him back here as quickly as possible. Take my car and go. Just get him back here now!"

The boys hopped into the back of the car and my driver stepped on the gas. It wasn't so much that I needed them to get Papa – I could have picked up the phone and called him more quickly than sending the two young ones to get him. I didn't want them to witness what I was afraid I was about to find, but I did want my father to come and see it.

I walked around to the back of the house again, held the edge of the doorframe with my hands, and kicked the back door as hard as I could. It took three tries, but the door came loose from the hinges and I was able to push it aside and walk in. Inside, the place was a mess. Pizza boxes and takeout containers littered the kitchen, dining room, and living room; some had been there long enough to solidify in the box. I walked through the lower level, shaking my head at the filth and clutter.

"Kristov!" I shouted up the stairs. "Get down here now! Papa's on his way, and you're gonna be fucked if you're not down here to greet him!"

I heard a noise from the upper level, but when my brother failed to appear, I knew I was going to have to take more drastic measures. I took the stairs two at a time and burst through the door to his bedroom. I was completely unprepared to witness how far Kristov had been drawn into the web of the *vory v zakone*.

On his bed in the center of the room, lay my brother and two women. All three had been shot once in the head from the front, leaving perfect dark circles in the middle of each of their foreheads. My brother's eyes were still open. I walked over and pushed his eyelids down, so that Papa wouldn't see him like that.

I felt the cold rage welling up in my gut as I looked around the room and realized that this had been a straight hit. The boxes of Kristov's drug supplies were untouched – not a single one had been disturbed. Someone had wanted him dead and they didn't care about collecting the rewards that went with the hit. They were out for blood.

I felt the blood in my veins icing over as I looked at the scene and tried to reconstruct the last few minutes of my brother's life. Whoever had done this would pay. I would make sure of it.

"Who did this?" Papa asked quietly. I'd been so wrapped up in plotting my revenge that I hadn't heard him enter the house. I turned and the pain on his face made my blood begin to boil. "Who did this to my son?"

"Papa, I don't know," I said. "But I have a guess."

"Who did this?" he repeated more forcefully as he walked over to the side of the bed and looked down at Kristov. He raised his head and bellowed, "WHO DID THIS TO MY SON?"

"I'm going to find out, Papa," I said. "I'm going to find out, and then, I'm going to make him pay."

Papa stood next to the bed, staring down at my brother for a long time. He didn't move or say a single word. He simply stood and stared at Kristov's lifeless body. I could feel my heart twisting my chest as I watched him out of the corner of my eye, but I knew better than to say anything until he was ready. As angry as he was, it wouldn't be surprising if he turned and took his rage out on me, and I didn't want to have to fight my own father, not today.

"Maksimka, I want you to find the son of a bitch who killed my son, your brother, and I want you to bring him to his fucking knees," he said in a dangerous voice. "I want him on his knees so I can watch him suffer as I drain the fucking life from his veins."

"Yes, Papa," I said. I stood not moving a muscle until he turned and walked out the door. I knew that the weight of the family business and avenging my brother's death were now entirely on my shoulders, and I felt myself sagging as I added them to the weight I already carried.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lexi

Moments before I was preparing to lock up the store and head to my audition, Max walked through the door looking like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. I watched as he walked into the office, checked the day's sales, and then came out to the sales floor and nodded.

"Break a leg, fiancée," he said without a smile. I tipped my head and looked at him curiously, wondering what had happened before he'd come to the store.

"Thank you, Mr. Malin," I said with as much of a smile as I could muster. "I'll do my best. I got you lunch, it's in the back in the fridge."

"I'll take care of dinner tonight," he said as he looked at the case and reached in to straighten a piece that was already perfectly straight. "I'll order out."

"Are you okay, Max?" I asked, softening my hard-line stance as I looked at him. I couldn't tell if he wanted to cry or kill someone, but it was clear that something bad had happened while he was away from the store. I softened a bit more and asked, "Do you need me to stay?"

"Oh no, I'm fine. Don't be silly." He waved me off with an unconvincing smile. "It's just a family thing, no big deal."

"Is your dad okay?" I asked. I knew his father lived in town and that he often went to see him. I assumed that his father was old and in need of help with basic living tasks, so it wouldn't have surprised me to find out that he'd fallen and hurt himself or something.

"Yeah, he's fine," Max sighed. "He's good. It's...it's...my brother."

"Oh, is he okay?" I asked.

"No, not really," he admitted, but when he didn't explain further, I felt like pushing wasn't what he wanted. Besides, I had an audition to make and I didn't want to be late.

"I'm so sorry, Max," I said. "Can we talk about it over dinner, maybe?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem," he said in a distracted way. "Did you sell the aquamarine set?"

"I did!" I replied. "Mrs. Zakhrov came in and bought it right after I'd opened up. She also wants a special statement piece, and she want me to ask you about the Star of Russia. Do you know what she's talking about?"

"I do. I'll take care of it," he said as he checked another case. I could tell he was trying to avoid looking at me, and there was something disturbing about it.

"Max, are you sure you're okay?" I asked again, this time a little softer. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Will you stop asking me questions I've already answered?" he shouted. "I'm fine! Just fine! Now get out of here and get to your audition!"

"Fine, I'll see you later tonight," I said as I turned and walked out the door.

#

I felt like I was floating on clouds the whole way home from the audition. I'd nailed the part and the chemistry between the actor who would play George and I was spectacular. The director had said he was almost certain that he wanted me to play Hedda, but that they had one more audition to see before they'd make their decision. I floated out of the theater and down the street singing *I Feel Pretty*, much to the delight of several small children playing on the sidewalk in front of the building. Max had sent the car to pick me up and I was soon whisked away to the penthouse where dinner awaited me.

"Max? Anna?" I called as I stepped out of the elevator. As soon as I called her name, a small gray ball of fur came flying past me headed toward the kitchen. I followed her and found Max scooping some kind of exotic cat food into her bowl as she danced around his feet purring and chirping.

"Don't let her get used to that. Once this gig is over, I'm not going to be able to afford your fancy cat food."

"It's nothing too special," he said. "Just a mix of tuna and some leftover salmon."

"That's what I said, too expensive!" I laughed as he put the plate down and we both watched Anna make quick work of her special treat. "And hello to you, too."

"Hey, sorry, how was the audition?" he asked as he unpacked the bag of Thai food he'd picked up on his way home. It smelled like heaven, and I was ravenous.

"It was fantastic!" I said as I pirouetted and then took a bow. "The director loved me and said that they have one more audition to see and then they'll make their decision, but that he'd almost completely sure that they'll pick me!"

"That's fantastic, Lexi," he smiled. "Good job; I guess you broke a leg, huh?"

"Hardly," I laughed. Something about Max was subdued and I wasn't sure if I should push or let it go and wait for him to tell me what was going on. "Hey, how's your brother doing?"

"Oh, he's not well," he said looking down at the plate he was filling with Pad Thai for me. He didn't look up as he handed it and a roll of silverware to me.

"I'm so sorry, Max," I said as I took the offerings and moved toward the kitchen table. "Is there anything I can do? Flowers? Magazines?"

"No, it's pretty much past that," he said darkly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked. I wasn't sure what he needed, so it seemed like asking was the best way to find out.

"Not really," he told me as he brought his plate over and sat down across from me. Anna had finished her dinner and joined us under the table. She mewed, patted my foot until I told her to stop, then she turned her attention to Max and when he didn't respond, she curled up on top of his foot and went to sleep. "Let's talk about the wedding, shall we?"

"Sure. I called around and got an appointment for a dress fitting next week, and I've got some places that can make us a cake big enough to feed a huge crowd," I said. "Where are you at?"

"I called the venue this afternoon and booked it," he smiled.

"Where are we getting married?" I laughed. "Or is it a surprise for the faux bride?"

"It's either The Rookery or the Newberry Library," he said as he dug into the plate of food. He took a few bites and then pushed the plate away.

"It's not good?" I asked.

"No, it's fine. I'm just not hungry." He reached down and scooped Anna up off of his foot and held her as she purred and munched on his hand. He flashed me a weak smile, "Late lunch."

"Max, what's going on?" I asked. Something was off and I couldn't tell what it was.

"Nothing, just..." he trailed off and focused on petting the kitten in his hand. She loved the attention, but I was disturbed by his silence.

"Just tell me, it's not a big deal," I said. Suddenly, I wondered if he was talk to me about the night before and let me down easy. "I'm a big girl, I know how to handle all kinds of news."

"I just wanted to," he said and was cut off as the buzzer for the elevator rang and he got up to answer it. I heard him telling the doorman, "Oh, yes, send her up."

"Who is it, Max?" I yelled from the kitchen as Anna came tearing back in and slid across the tile floor.

"Oh now isn't this cute?" a woman's voice said as she rounded the corner and stepped into the kitchen. She was tall and curvy, and she had the most severely chopped bob haircut I'd ever seen. Her hair was jet black and was so shiny I felt confident that if I stood in front of it, I would be able to see my own reflection. She was wearing a low cut halter-top that looked like it was connected to the flowing wide length pants she wore. On her feet were a pair of silver sandals that showed off her black toenail polish. She carried a small black clutch and a pashmina, and the only jewelry she wore were two enormous silver bracelets, one on each arm. Her makeup was flawless and the red lipstick she wore looked like it had been made especially for her.

"Hi, I'm Lexi," I said offering my hand.

"Hello, Lexi. I'm Natalia," she said, smiling as she looked around at the kitchen and then back at me. "Are you kitchen help?"

"No, Nat, she's definitely not kitchen help," Max interjected. He'd changed his clothes while Natalia and I had introduced ourselves, and was now wearing a black tuxedo. He looked like a totally different man than the one who had been eating dinner with me, and snuggling Anna not fifteen minutes before. "Lexi is my business partner in my jewelry store venture."

"Oh, I see, you're the sales girl!" the woman laughed, making me feel very self-conscious standing in the middle of the kitchen still dressed in my

wilted work clothes while they looked like a photograph out of Gatsby.

"No, not just a sales girl, Nat," Max's voice contained a dark note and the woman stopped laughing. "She's my business partner. Lexi, I'm sorry, I completely forgot about this function tonight. I told Natalia I'd go with her before all of this planning began. I'll be back in a few hours and we can pick up where we left off, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem," I nodded as the other woman sized me up and gave me a hard look.

"But, Max, you promised you'd take me out after the play!" she cried as she fidgeted with her bracelets. I had learned enough about jewelry to know that one of them cost more than my entire month's salary at Max's – both jobs included. She was wealthy and spoiled, and I realized I had no idea who she was aside from her name. When no one volunteered any information, I spoke up.

"So, Natalia, how do you and Max know each other?" I asked as I donned my best sales girl smile.

"Oh, we go way back, don't we, Max?" she smiled and raised an eyebrow as she looked at him and suddenly it dawned on me that she was the one he was sleeping with. She was his girlfriend and he was afraid to tell me because he didn't want to screw things up at the store.

"I see," I said nodding. "How far is way back?"

"We were teenagers, weren't we, Max?" she laughed as she rested her hand on his arm in an obvious display of ownership. "My God, we were such idiots back then. You know how it goes, don't you, Lexi?"

"Oh, absolutely! Of course," I nodded, eager for both of them to leave so I could go back to my room and feel like an idiot in private. Of course, Max would have a girlfriend, and of course, she would be a gorgeous socialite who had known him his whole life. I squirmed uncomfortably as I realized just how much of an outsider I was and how very little I really knew about Max Malin.

"I'll be back in a few hours and we can continue this conversation," Max said quietly to me. Natalia was pulling on his arm urging him to hurry up or they'd be late.

"Sure, whatever," I said as I looked down at my feet. I felt like an outsider and by the way Natalia was behaving, I knew for certain that I was one.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Max

"My, my, my, she's certainly a cute one, isn't she?" Natalia teased as we rode to the theater. She reached out to run her hand down my thigh, but I shifted away.

"You didn't have to be so rude to her," I scolded and looked out the window.

"You're mad," she observed. "You're always a pain when you're crushing out over some new girl. This too shall pass, Max."

"It's not Lexi," I said darkly.

"Then, what's got you so moody tonight?" she asked impatiently. "You're not going to be any fun if you keep this up, and I've arranged for you to meet some potential investors tonight, so you'd better put on a

cheerful face or they're going to be completely turned off by your bad attitude."

"Kristov is dead," I said flatly.

"What?" she gasped and reached for my hand. "Oh, Max, no!"

"He was executed this morning in his bedroom," I said without looking at her. I pulled my hand away and stared out the window as I recalled the scene and the way in which I found my brother. "He was with a couple of girls. They were killed, too."

"What did Vladimir say?" she quickly asked. "He must be enraged."

"He was surprisingly calm," I admitted. "But he put the onus on me to find the killers and avenge Kristov's death. I have no idea who did this, but I am going to make them pay once I find them."

"How can I help?" Natalia's ability to change gears and adjust to the situation was one of the things I valued most about her. She might have started the night trying to seduce me, but now that she knew the situation, she switched into action mode and pushed everything else aside.

"Can you put out some feelers and see who's out there talking about it?" I gripped her hand and squeezed tightly. She nodded as she returned the squeeze.

We didn't talk about Kristov for the rest of the evening. Instead, Natalia took control as she smiled and small talked her way through the crowds of

people in the lobby. She introduced me to a number of potential investors, and then led the conversation toward light topics, rather than business. She did all of the work as I hung back and tried to figure out my next move – and kept trying to push Lexi and the way her body had felt pressed against mine out of my mind.

I was relieved when we finally found our seats and the lights went down. Despite my protests, I actually enjoyed Ibsen's work and Nora's dilemma took my mind off of my problems for a short time. However, nothing could take my mind completely off of Lexi. During the intermission, I tried to call her, but her phone went straight to voicemail. I spent the next hour trying to focus Nora's attempts to solve her problem with Torvald and the loan she'd secretly taken out, but it did little good and my mind wandered back to the penthouse as I wondered what Lexi was doing and why she hadn't answered my call.

When the curtain rose, Nat leaned over and whispered, "Go home. Go find her and figure out what's going on."

"Am I that obvious?" I chuckled.

"Probably not to everyone," she replied, patting my arm. "But I've known you for most of my life. Go find Lexi, Max. I'll put out the word on the street and see what I can come up with about Kristov."

I winced when she said his name, causing her to pull me into a hug. I was grateful, but I didn't have time for sentimentality. I needed to find out who had killed my brother before Papa did. If he found them first, then there would be an all-out war. If I could find them, though, I could take care of the problem quickly and efficiently without the mess. It wasn't that I was less brutal than Papa, it's just that I had subtler ways of dealing with those who acted out against the family. The man who killed my brother would pay – that much was certain.

"Go to her," Natalia urged, pulling me out of my thoughts. "I've got work to do here."

"Yeah, sure," I nodded as I turned and walked toward the waiting car. When I turned back to look at Natalia, she had disappeared into the crowd.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lexi

After Max and Natalia had left for the theater, I poured myself a glass of wine and took it out on the balcony, where I sat and thought about how stupid I'd been for harboring some silly little fantasy about how Max might be the handsome prince who would sweep me off my feet and carry me away to happily-ever-after land. I hadn't realized I'd actually been thinking that until Natalia had shown up and blown the fragile dream to bits with her presence.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Viv. She picked up on the third ring and sounded out of breath.

"Hey, Wally, what's up?" she asked.

"What in the heck are you doing, Viv?" I laughed as she breathed heavily into the phone. "You sound like an obscene phone caller!"

"I'm working out!" she said. "I've got to be able to fit into whatever insanely form-fitting bridesmaid dress you pick out and I've only got a month."

"Viv?" I said shaking my head on the other end. "You do realize that this isn't real, don't you? The wedding, the dresses, none of it is for an actual wedding. It's a publicity stunt designed to garner attention for investors."

"I don't care if it's nothing but an excuse for a shopping trip with my best friend," she laughed. "I'm still going to be able to fit into a smoking hot dress!"

"You're crazy, you know that, right?"

"Crazy as a fox!" she replied. "What's going on?"

"I need advice," I admitted. I hadn't told Viv how I felt about Max, but she'd been pushing me to take things further since the start of the whole adventure. I hadn't told her about the night before, and I wasn't sure I wanted to, but telling the story without all the parts seemed counterproductive.

"Hit me up, I'll give it free of charge," she panted. "But I'm going into aerobic mode, so just keep talking for the next five minutes while I climb this hill."

"We fooled around last night, Viv," I said, deciding to go straight for the truth.

"Wait, what?" I heard something clunk in the background. "I've got to sit down to hear this. Okay, lay it on me."

I told her about our dinner on the balcony and how it had turned into a seriously heavy petting session that ended with mutual masturbation. And then, I told her how I'd run back to my own bedroom and left him sleeping on the chaise.

"You left Max Malin sleeping on a chaise on the balcony of his penthouse after the two of you had mutually satisfied each other, but not had sex?" she asked. "Am I getting the story right?"

"Yes, Viv," I said rolling my eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me," she warned then added, "And don't act surprised that I know you're doing it."

"You're impossible," I laughed.

"No, you're the impossible one," she gently scolded. "Jeez, Wally, what the hell? Why aren't you buffing his brains out tonight?"

"Now, we're getting to the problem," I said. "He's already got a girlfriend."

"Huh? How is that possible?" she said.

"She showed up to take him to the theater tonight," I sighed. "She's gorgeous. Tall, curvy, impeccable taste in clothes and jewelry, and they've known each other since they were teens. What else could you want? It's like a fairytale story – one that doesn't have room for me in it."

"Oh give me a break," she said, and this time, I could hear her rolling her eyes. "He's not involved with her. They're BFFs, it's the most common thing in the world."

"What are you talking about?" I laughed. "It's not common!"

"Of course it is," she replied. "Case in point, Rory Michaels."

"What about him?"

"He's my Max, and I'm his Natalie."

"Natalia," I corrected her.

"Whatever," she said impatiently. "The point is that he and I go places, do things, hang out, and have sex – pretty damn good sex, I might add – but we're not a couple, nor will we ever be."

"Why not?" I asked, truly confused by what she was saying.

"Oh please, Rory? Give me a break!"

"Wait, you're doing everything a girlfriend would do with a boyfriend, but you won't ever consider him your boyfriend?" I couldn't wrap my brain around what she was saying.

"Yep, that's it exactly," she said.

"That is seriously messed up." I shook my head trying to process it.

"What if one of you meets someone you want to actually date?"

"Then, the other one backs off and lets go," she said. "It happens all the time. What world are you living in, Wally? Have you not heard of this before?"

"No! I've never heard of this; it's insane!" I cried. "I don't...oh forget it."

"I know, you can't wrap your pretty little brain around it," she laughed. "You really need to read *The Ethical Slut*, girlfriend. I've been pushing it ever since I took History of Sexuality at DePaul. It changed my life."

"So, now you're recommending a course in ethical non-monogamy to help solve my problems?" I laughed. Leave it to Viv to use my personal relationship anguish to push her polyamory agenda. "I think I'll pass this time, Viv. But you've given me something to consider."

"I'm just saying that while it might look like he's involved with the woman, he might not actually be," she offered. "You'll never know until you ask. Use your words, my little friend. Use your words. You might be pleasantly surprised at what you find."

"Fine, whatever," I said in an exasperated tone. "I'll ask. I'll ask when he gets home."

"No, you won't," she laughed. "But at least you'll keep your mind open to other possibilities!"

"Viv, you're a real pill, you know that don't you?" I sighed.

"Yeah, but you love me," she laughed. "Now, I need to get back to climbing this mountain, so that I can fit into the dress! I'll see you tomorrow for our shopping trip!"

"See you tomorrow, and Viv?" I said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"That's what I'm here for, Wally! Love ya, babe!" she replied before disconnecting.

I sat looking out over the city as the lights twinkled and the traffic moved below and wondered if Viv was right. If she was, this would open a new door between Max and I.

I just hoped I was prepared to walk through it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Max

We were halfway home when my phone rang. The number was the landline at Ursus, and when I answered, the voice on the other end was Feliks, my father's right hand man.

"Maksim, you need to come to the bar now," he said. "Your father had been injured and we need to talk."

"What do you mean, injured?" I asked.

"Come to Ursus, now," he said before disconnecting. It was just like my father to have one of his men call and drop a bomb without explaining, but after Kristov's murder this morning, I wasn't going to question it. I redirected my driver and stared out the window, silently watching the darkened city streets rush by. I'd talk with Lexi later. Right now, I had to find out what was going on.

When I walked into the bar, I noticed that one of the mirrors behind the liquor display had been shattered and only jagged fragments remained. The bartender pointed in the direction of the back room as he continued sweeping up the mess, and I followed his directions.

"Papa? Papa, what happened here?" I called as I walked through the door leading to the private meeting room my father had built for the *bratán*.

"*Zhopa!*" he swore angrily. "That's what happened! Those *zhopan* come into my bar and start trouble, and I'm going to end it!"

"Papa, what the hell happened?" I asked trying to hide the shock of what I was seeing. Papa was sitting on a chair off to the side of the huge round table where he and his *bratán* held meetings and often played dice or cards while they drank. He was holding a bag of ice over one eye, and when he pulled it away to show me, I could see that he'd been badly beaten. His eye was red and completely swollen shut and his lip was still trickling blood where it had been split. Sitting next to him was his personal physician and best friend, who was working with a set of well-worn tools as he set what appeared to be a broken wrist.

"It's the young thugs, Maksimka," my father shook his head wearily and winced as the doctor realigned his wrist before wrapping it and starting to apply the cast material. Papa quietly said something to him in Russian

before turning his attention back to me. "It's Dementyev's boys. I've seen them before. They're ruthless."

"But what happened? How did they get you?" I asked, unable to believe that a group of young thugs could have gotten through my father's guards. I turned and looked at them.

"Don't get upset with them, Maksimka," Papa gently scolded. "I tangled with the young ones. They were disturbing business, and I'd had enough of their drunken outbursts!"

He described how the boys had come in, loud and rowdy, and begun picking fights with various patrons. Knowing what had happened with Kristov, no one wanted to engage with the thugs, but they persisted until my father had come out from the back room and demanded they leave. At that point, one of the thugs had challenged Papa to a fight and when he'd laughed and told him that he wasn't going to fight a baby kitten, they boy lunged at Papa and punched him. Papa had put up a good fight, Feliks assured me, but the other boys had held the rest of the crowd at gunpoint while Papa and the ringleader had duked it out.

When the thug had decided he'd had enough, he whistled to the ones holding the guns and they'd all run out, but not before the leader stopped and spit on the bar and dropped his calling card. Papa handed it over to me

to look at. It was a plain white business card with an intricate Celtic cross in the center and *MIR*, the Russian word for peace, inscribed underneath it.

"I don't get it," I said as I looked down at the card and back at Papa.

"What does this mean?"

"In Moscow, the Celtic cross was a symbol of the white power movement," he explained as he knocked back the shot of vodka Feliks put in front of him. "They're racist bastards. And the word *MIR* is peace, but it also means that he'll only be reformed by a firing squad. It's a death wish, Maksim."

"But why are they after you, Papa? What do they want?"

"Maksim, this is why I needed you to come back and help your brother," he said quietly. "The wolves are circling. That *sookin syn* Dementyev is trying to take over all the business on the West Side and he's a snake. He has no respect for traditions. He has no honor."

"Do you think those are the ones who killed Kristov?" I asked in a low voice. "Did they do it, Papa?"

"No, Maksim, they're too young and foolish," he shook his head and looked down at the cast on his arm. "They have no self-control. The ones who killed Kristov are disciplined. They are soldiers."

I nodded and stood silently, waiting for my father to tell me what it was he wanted me to do. Years of conditioning had made me wary of proposing

any ideas or plans unless he'd deemed them worthy, but looking down at him, it dawned on me that he was an old man. He looked fragile and tired, and I worried that the reason everything was going to hell was because he wasn't strong enough to lead.

Secretly, I also worried that Kristov had made enemies that my father knew nothing about and that this wave of attack had nothing to do with Papa and everything to do with my brother. I ran my hand through my hair and shook my head as I tried to sort it all out. I looked at Papa, then around the room at the *bratán* who stood faithfully guarding him. They would protect him while I figured out what to do next. I had to trust that they would, and when I scanned the room, each one nodded almost imperceptibly as if they knew what I was thinking and were agreeing to shoulder the burden.

"Papa, I want you to go home and stay there," I said. I knew I was taking a risk in ordering him around in front of his men, but I also knew that someone had to step up and take charge right now. And the way I figured, it was better me than an outsider. "I need to figure some things out and I can't do that if I'm worried about you being killed here in the bar."

"I can't take time off!" he bellowed as he slammed his newly casted hand down on the table. The roar of pain that followed caused us all to look

away. Right now, Vladimir Malinchenko was a broken man, and I would have to step in and take his place.

"Go home, Papa," I said as I looked at Feliks. "Go home and just rest for a few days until I get this straightened out. Just give me a few days, please?"

"Fine," he grumbled as he peered at me with one eye. "Do what you need to do. I'll stay home for three days. But just three! Do you understand me, Maksim? Three days!"

"Yes, Papa," I replied dutifully. I knew I would probably need a lot more time than that, but three days was a good start.

CHAPTER FORTY

Lexi

The next morning, I walked into the kitchen and found Max fixing coffee as usual. He seemed tired and withdrawn, and when I said good morning, he gave me a wan smile and handed me a cup of steaming hot coffee.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a lot on my mind this morning," he said as he poured himself a cup and pulled out the business section of the paper. I took the front page and we sat reading in compatible silence until I ran across a local story that made me gasp.

"Max, did you see this?" I asked as I held up the paper. "Local bar owner beaten by thugs. It says that they think these guys are part of the

mafia and may be connected to a shooting that took place earlier in the week. What the heck is going on over in Wicker Park?"

"It's a crazy city, Lexi," he said, never taking his eyes off of the paper in front of him. "I have no clue what's happening on the West Side, but it doesn't sound good, does it?"

"I just thought maybe you'd know since you know some of the Russians who come and buy jewelry," I ventured. I wanted to ask more questions, but he didn't seem to be in the mood to answer them.

"I really couldn't tell you," he said as he looked up and flashed me one of the most fake smiles I'd ever seen.

"Don't pull the salesman smile on me, Mr. Malin," I scolded in a joking tone. "I'm not buying."

"Then, what are you buying, Ms. Wallace?" he shot back in an irritated tone.

"Sheesh, sorry, I was just trying to lighten the mood," I muttered. I sipped my coffee and continued reading the paper. There was something going on, and I knew it, but I also knew that trying to drag it out of him wouldn't get me any good result and might actually backfire.

"No, I'm sorry," he said after a few minutes of silence. "I'm tired and it was a rough night."

"Yeah, I'm sure that your girlfriend doesn't make things easy on you," I blurted out.

"Huh?" he said as a look of genuine confusion crossed his face. "My girlfriend?"

"Yeah, Miss Socialite that you went to the theater with last night?" I said incredulously. "The one who was wearing my entire year's salary on one arm? Duh!"

"Natalia?"

"Who else did you think I was talking about?" I asked. My voice became higher and more irritated as I continued. "I mean, really, Max, why didn't you ask her to marry you? It seems like it would have been a whole lot easier to marry the girl that you're actually dating, rather than hire an actress to play a shopgirl and then be your fake bride!"

"Lexi, what in God's name are you talking about?" he shouted.

"I'm talking about how you had sex with me on the balcony even though you have a girlfriend!" I yelled back and then inhaled sharply as I realized what I'd just said.

"Is that why you're mad at me?" he asked dropping his voice.

"I'm not mad at all," I shrugged.

"Nice, nice shrug," he said sarcastically.

"What?"

"Nothing says I don't give a shit like a good old shrug," he replied.

"So, what? Maybe I don't," I shrugged again for good measure.

"My mother always said that if you really didn't care, you wouldn't cry or feel defensive," he said. "And, it seems to me that you're pretty darn defensive."

"Don't turn this on me, Malin," I warned. "I asked you a question and you're refusing to answer it."

"What question?"

"God, you are infuriating!" I yelled. "Why didn't you marry your girlfriend?"

"Because I don't have a girlfriend," he said as he continued reading the paper. I knew he was pretending, but I let him have that one.

"Then, who is Natalia?" I asked.

"She's my friend from high school," he said. "Just like I told you last night."

"But she treats you like you're her boyfriend," I accused.

"She does sometimes, but mostly, she treats me like her best friend," he replied as he looked across the table and fixed his gaze on me. Those icy blue eyes were like lasers and I couldn't look away.

"Do you have sex with her?" I asked, feeling emboldened by my self-righteous anger and wanting to know what was really going on.

"Sometimes," he said. It was an honest admission that took me by surprise.

"Did you have sex with her last night?" I probed.

"No, I did not," he said as he held my gaze. I could feel the tension building between us as he held my gaze. The familiar flame of desire had been ignited and now, I felt the heat creeping up through my veins. I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair, but refused to look away.

"Why not?" I asked quietly.

"You want to know why I didn't have sex with Natalia last night?" he asked.

"Uh huh," I nodded.

Max set the paper down and pushed his chair back from the table. His eyes never left mine as he stood up and walked around to where I sat and tugged at the elastic band that held my hair in a ponytail, releasing it so that it cascaded down over my shoulders. He slid one hand behind my neck and gently pulled me to my feet.

"I didn't have sex with Natalia last night..." he whispered as he wrapped his other arm around my waist and lowered his face so that he was within inches of mine. "Because all I could think about was how much I wanted you."

My eyes widened as he bridged the gap and gently kissed my lips.

"Lexi," he murmured as he softly kissed me again and again. "I don't know what happened the other night, but I can't stop thinking about you. About your body, about how much I want to touch you and feel you. It's terribly distracting, you know."

"Oh, Max," I sighed as I wrapped my arms around his neck and returned his kisses.

His hands slowly roamed my body and I felt a fierce need welling up inside me as he lifted my thin t-shirt up over my head to expose my naked torso. His fingers captured my already-hard nipples between his fingers and squeezed, drawing a long, low moan from my lips.

"Ah yes," he whispered as he repeated the action and smiled when I moaned again. "I've been thinking about this for the past two days. How all I wanted was you naked again."

He quickly yanked down my pajama bottoms and discarded them on the floor as he wrapped an arm around my lower back and lifted me up on to the edge of the counter, where he rested his hands on my knees for a moment before pushing them apart. He tipped me backwards onto the surface as he dipped his head and began slowly running his tongue across my lower abdomen as he worked his way lower and lower. I fought him for a moment, but he was stronger than I was and had the advantage of leverage.

His tongue traced a light path down between my legs before he branched out and began licking and stroking my inner thighs. I moaned as he traced a line of fire from my knee to the upper edge of my groin, but didn't move inward. It was deliciously excruciating, and I was rendered helpless as he tongued and teased me into submission.

Once he was certain I wouldn't fight, he moved his attention inward and began by lightly blowing on the curls between my thighs. I shifted and tried to close my legs, but he held them apart and began gently stroking my outer lips with his tongue. Light licks were followed by long strokes with his flattened tongue, causing me to writhe beneath his mouth.

"Max-" I gasped as he dipped the tip of his tongue between my lips and slid it into the slippery wetness. I couldn't breathe and yet, I didn't want to. I lost myself in his ministrations and before long, he'd run his hands up my thighs and was parting me with his fingers as he began licking and sucking more intensely. I cried out, "Max! Max! Max!" but he didn't stop or even acknowledge that he'd heard me.

His fingers played in my wetness, slipping and sliding up and down as his tongue circled my aroused and erect nub. I heard him softly groan as he closed his lips around it and gently tugged. I arched my back to grind myself into his lips. He spread me wider as he slipped two fingers into the outermost edge of my entrance and began to tease by pushing them in an

inch or two and then slowly withdrawing. I moaned and arched my back as I tried to drive his fingers in deeper, but he maintained his position and teased until I was begging him to push them in.

"Oh, Max, please! Please! I need it!" I cried as I thrust my hips up to meet his hand.

"Oh no, no," he murmured as he drew another long lazy circle around my clitoris and pulled another moan from somewhere deep inside me. "I'm not even close to done with you."

"Max, I'm going to lose my mind," I begged.

"Good, I'd like to see that." He ran his tongue down between my lips until he could push it inside of me and tease a little more. I groaned and pounded my fists on the counter as he teased, and then in an instant, he was above me, pulling me up so that I was sitting and looking down at him as he knit three fingers together and slowly drove them deep inside of me. I gripped his shoulders and leaned heavily on him as he pushed his fingers deeper then stopped and waited. I could feel him buried deep inside me while I pulsed around his hand, and when he slowly began pulling out, I let loose a scream as he stroked the tender skin of my inner walls and brought me close to climax.

"Oh no, you don't get it that easy," he said as he slipped his free hand into my hair and raised my head so that I was looking into his eyes while he

slid his fingers in and out, slowly and deliberately. He brought me to the edge over and over. Each time, just as I thought I was about to fall, he would slow down and hold my gaze until I was back with him, and then he'd resume his maddeningly sensual stroking.

I had no idea how long he'd been doing this when I let loose and began to cry. I begged him to set me free. He pulled back and then with a few strong thrusts of his hand, his fingers stroked my inner walls while his thumb pressed my clitoris and pushed me toward release. When I climaxed a few moments later, I felt Max's lips on mine as he pulled the orgasm from my body. I pulsed and throbbed around his hand while he gently maintained a rhythm that drew all the sensations out of me. He kissed me softly and held me against his chest as he slowly and gently withdrew his fingers.

I moaned in disappointment as I felt the emptiness where his fingers had been and wrapped my arms tightly around his neck as our kiss deepened. I could smell my scent in his fingers when he ran them across my cheek and through my hair, and I knew I wanted more, so much more.

"More, please?" I whispered into his lips as he wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly against his chest.

"Oh yes, there's so much more where that came from," he whispered back.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Max

I was ready to pick Lexi up off of the counter, carry her back to my bedroom, and spend the day exploring every inch of her incredibly responsive body — when my phone rang. I tried to ignore it, but whoever was on the other end was persistent. When I finally answered it, it was Feliks telling me that Papa had grown angrier about the attack, had strapped on his pistol, and was threatening to go out and find the punks who'd attacked him. I told him I'd get dressed and be there within the hour, but that he was not to let Papa out of the house.

"Who was that?" Lexi asked. She looked like a fantasy come to life as she leaned against the counter completely naked with a dreamy look on her face. I'd never been a man who spent a lot of time focused on giving a woman pleasure the way I'd just done with Lexi, but then, I'd also made a

habit of picking extremely dominant women who liked it rough and hard and none of them had ever responded to what I'd just done.

"My father's second-in-command," I said. "Papa is not doing so well today, so I need to go see him."

"Is that because of your brother?" she asked innocently. I winced knowing that this was part of the reason Papa was enraged, but I couldn't tell her the whole story without risking everything. She'd never understand how someone like me could be involved in my family's business and all the violence it begat.

"Something like that," I said. "Are you okay opening the store by yourself again?"

"Oh God! The store!" she cried as she gathered up her clothing and made a dash for the bathroom to get ready. She yelled on her way down the hall, "You made me forget everything!"

I chuckled as I ran a hand through my hair and caught a whiff of her scent on my fingers and face. I had lost myself in the act of pleasing this woman, and now, I was going to have to go try and reason with my father and convince him that seeking revenge in the state he was in was not wise.

#

Less than an hour later, I walked through the door of the house I'd grown up in and saw my father sitting in a lounge looking angry.

"Papa, what's wrong?" I asked, trying to hide the fact that I'd been summoned.

"You know exactly what's wrong, Maksim," he said narrowed eyes. "Don't play this bullshit game with your father. I won't have it."

"Yes, Papa," I automatically replied. "Then, tell me what it is you want to do and let me help."

"I want to kill the *sookin syn* who murdered my son," he said in a voice that was so deadly calm it frightened me. My father was a big, loud man who bellowed and yelled at everyone. When he was calm, it was a sign of very bad things.

"I know you do, Papa," I nodded. "We all do. And, I'm going to find the man who did it and make him pay. I promise. But you can't go out there and wave a gun around. Not here in the city – you'll be arrested and thrown in jail for endangering the public, and then I'll have to spend my time and money getting you out of jail. It's best if you stay here and rest while I do the leg work, okay?"

"Maksim," he said in a voice that was so full of pain it took everything I had not to look away to avoid his eyes. "They killed my son."

"I know, Papa," I said as I gently patted the arm that was not encased in a cast. "I know, Papa. They killed my brother."

"No, you have no idea," he shook his head as his voice climbed until he was bellowing, "They can kill a lot of people, but they cannot kill a man's son!"

"Papa, calm down!" I begged as I sat down next to him. His face was red and he was sweating profusely as he pounded on the arm of the chair with his good hand.

"They cannot kill a man's SON!" he yelled over and over. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the rage was over and my father sat in his chair with one hand over his face, sobbing like a heartbroken child. I put my arm around him and waited for the storm to pass. I had no idea what to say to him and knew that until he gave me a sign, I should remain quiet because if I said the wrong thing, I might wind up at the losing end of his pistol. It was how my father had always operated, and there was some comfort in that.

"It's okay, Papa, it's going to be okay," I said softly as I sat resting my hand on his arm when he began to rock back and forth, sobbing his anger and frustration. I waited until he had calmed down before I summoned Feliks and told him that Papa needed to be driven up to see Babi. I sat back down next to Papa, and said, "Papa, I'm going to have Feliks take you to see

Babi. You can have a nice meal and talk to her about Kristov. No one's told her yet."

"Oh no, no, no," he said as he shook his head. "I can't tell her about Kristov. She'll be broken."

"Papa, someone has to tell her," I said, trying to be sympathetic, but also needing to get him out of the range of danger for a little while. "I think it would be good for you to be with her."

"She will blame me," he said, looking up at me with eyes that were full of pain. "She will tell me that it's all my fault."

"Papa, she will not," I said, suddenly unsure about whether that was true or not.

"She blames me for your mother, too, you know," he said sadly. I inhaled sharply as he said it. My father and I never discussed my mother's death, but I'd always blamed him for it. Kristov had been the one who'd tried to convince me that it wasn't Papa's fault, that Mama had been sick and she'd simply taken a way out that offered less pain. I'd always doubted his account, but my father's admission made me wonder. He looked up at me and said, "And, I know you do, too, Maksimka."

"Papa..." I started to say something, but stopped because I had no idea what to say. I did blame him, but telling him so wouldn't do anyone any

good right now. I needed him to be rational and reasonable, not emotionally driven by rage and pain.

"It's okay, Maksimka, your brother told me," he said as he patted my hand. "You do blame me, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa," I admitted.

The blow that hit my cheek was so fast and hard that I didn't have time to prepare. The pain exploded across my cheek and drove me to the ground. I hit my head on the edge of the coffee table as I went down and felt the blood began to flow from the gash. I looked up at my father, dazed by the hit. He was looking down at me with disgust.

"You ungrateful *sookin syn*," he hissed. "You are the worst kind of son – the one who believes the worst about his own father. I will tell you this, I helped bring you into this world and I can take you out of this world just as easily. I would feel no remorse for taking an ungrateful son like you out of this world."

I reached up and touched the spot where I'd hit the table, when I drew my hand away, I saw the fresh red blood dripping off of my fingertips. I looked up at my father and then pulled myself off of the floor. I walked into the kitchen, grabbed a fistful of paper towels, and pressed them to the wound before walking back into the living room and facing my father. I stared at him for a long while before finally speaking.

"I will find the man who killed my brother," I said in a voice void of emotion. "I will find him and I will make him pay for what he has done. And once I have completed that task, I will bring you the evidence that I have done it. Then, and only then, will I shut the door on you. You will be dead to me, and I to you. I am done with this. I am done with your anger and your rage. I am done with you."

I turned and walked out the front door as he called after me, cursing my birth and screaming that I was always an ungrateful *sookin syn* and would always be one.

I shut out the sound of his voice when I closed the door to the car and instructed the driver to take me to the store. On the drive there, I vowed to tell Lexi the truth about my past and let her in once and for all.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Lexi

Despite Max's early morning breakfast distraction, I managed to make it to the store on time to open for business. I couldn't stop replaying the morning's sex over and over and as a result, I was a little distracted when Mrs. Zakhrov rang the bell. I let her in and failed to notice the three young men loitering behind her as she entered. They pushed their way into the store and began loudly arguing over which necklace to buy their girlfriends.

I smiled at Mrs. Zakhrov, walked over to the boys, and asked if I could help them make a good choice. The leader had a strange look about him. He was dressed in a business suit that looked slightly too small for his enormous frame and was sporting a faux-hawk that looked like it had been smoothed down with an enormous amount of product. The other two were similarly dressed, but their suits fit them a little better. All in all, they

looked like foreign bankers and since we had a lot of them downtown, I didn't think much of it.

"Can I help you gentlemen decide on something?" I asked as I approached. The leader suddenly whipped around and pulled a gun out from under his jacket.

"Yeah, bitch, you can help me decide whether or not to kill you," he growled as he reached out and grabbed my arm. Mrs. Zakhrov screamed as the other two grabbed her and yanked her purse out of her hands.

"You don't have to do this," I said, trying to maintain a calm demeanor, despite the fact that my heart felt like it was pounding out of my chest. "I'll give you what you want. Just tell me what you want."

"I want the owner of this shithole," the man growled as he spun me around, wrapped his arm around my neck, and pointed the gun at my head. "I want to see Malinchenko, now!"

"I'm sorry? Do you mean Mr. Malin?" I asked genuinely confused as to what the man wanted. "He's the owner, and he should be back any minute. He just ran out on an errand."

"I want to see that bastard Malinchenko!" he insisted. "That son of a bitch needs to be taught a lesson for what he's done to us!"

The other two men seemed to have lost interest in Mrs. Zakhrov once they determined that she had very little cash in her wallet. Still, they held

onto her arms and pressed her against a display case as one of them spoke Russian and she began to cry.

"What are you doing to her?" I cried. "Stop it! You're hurting her!"

"They're not hurting her," the man said in a bored tone. "They're telling her what a capitalist pig she is and what a disgrace she is to the Russian community."

"Why would they do that?" I yelled. "She's done nothing to deserve that!"

"Yeah, but her husband is a money-grubbing pig who earns his living off the labor of the working class," he said indignantly. "So, by association, she's a pig, as well."

"Oh, give me a break, you Marxist weirdo," I said, angry that these men had broken into the store and were causing Mrs. Zakhrov such pain. "You live in the U.S., how much of a socialist can you really be? Plus, you're wearing a Gucci suit that costs probably a year's rent in some parts of this city. Give me a fucking break!"

"I like this one!" he laughed as he squeezed my throat a little tighter, cutting off a large portion of my airway. "She's feisty! Perhaps we should have a little fun with the feisty one?"

"Fuck you," I gasped as he released me and let me breathe a little before squeezing tightly again. He was playing cat and mouse with me, and

if he squeezed me any tighter, I was going to be one dead little mouse. Mrs. Zakharov said something I couldn't understand, and the two men holding her let go immediately. They looked over at their boss, repeated what she'd said, and he quickly dropped his hold on me.

The three took off running for the door with Mrs. Zakhrov shouting at them in Russian as they exited the store. I looked over at her as she bent down and retrieved her clutch from the floor where they'd thrown it.

"I have no idea what you said to them," I said. "But those must have been some powerful words, indeed."

"Little boys who play big boy games sometimes have to be reminded of the fact that they still sit at the children's table," she said as she pulled out a tube of lipstick and applied a fresh coat before patting her hair and smiling at her reflection.

#

Ten minutes later, Max walked through the door just as Mrs. Zakhrov and I were giving our statements to the police.

"What in the hell happened here?" he demanded.

I quickly filled him in on the break in and told him about how the men had demanded to see Malinchenko. "Do you know this person?" I asked. Max nodded and then went over to check on Mrs. Zakhrov. She spoke to him in Russian and a look of recognition spread across his face. He nodded

and asked if her car was waiting outside for her. When he'd gotten her safely to her car and closed the door, he came back into the store and spoke with the police.

I stood and watched as the crime scene investigators took fingerprints from the display cases and laughed quietly to myself as they pulled up a set of perfect handprints off the front door. The stupid criminals had planted their hands on the glass door as they were leaving. Once the police were done and had left, Max closed the door, locked it, and turned over the closed sign.

"Come with me," he said holding out his hand. I took it and he pulled me back to the office, where he poured me a shot of whiskey and told me to tell him everything that had happened. I recounted all the details I could remember, from the way the suits looked, to the sound of the men's voices as they shouted at Mrs. Zakhrov in Russian.

Max listened carefully and jotted down notes as he did, then when I was finished, he looked at me and said, "That's it, we're getting an armed security guard for the store and one for you."

"Max, don't be ridiculous," I protested. "They were common thieves and they didn't even take anything. They just waved their guns around and then left."

"All the more reason for you to have a security guard," he insisted. "I'm not going to have you out there vulnerable and exposed."

"Max, those men don't have the first clue who I am. I'm no one to them!" I protested again. It seemed excessive to me to have a guard following me around all the time and, quite frankly, I didn't like the idea of having my privacy violated that way. "I'm not afraid of them."

"Lexi, I'm not going to have this argument," he said firmly. "You will have a security guard and that's all there is to it."

"You are so damn stubborn!" I yelled. "What if I don't want a damn security guard tailing me all over the place?"

"Then, you'll have to find a way to make peace with it," he said calmly. "I'm not arguing with you; it's a done deal."

"And, what if I quit?" I said calmly. "What if I tell you that the security detail is my no-fly zone and if you do it, I'll quit?"

"You wouldn't," he said.

"Try me," I challenged as I stood staring at him defiantly with my hands on my hips. "I'm not kidding, Max. No deal."

"Lexi, you don't understand," he sighed.

"No, I really don't, so I suggest you start explaining," I said, refusing to back down.

I wasn't going to give in on this one without a fight and from the looks of it, neither was Max.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Max

After talking with Mrs. Zakhrov, I knew exactly who had been the store and I was adamant that we get security for the store and one who would follow Lexi wherever she went. I debated about whether I should tell her exactly why it was essential, but backed down when I realized that telling her might result in her leaving and then she'd be at an even greater risk.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Lexi," I said. "It's a done deal. Quit if you like, but I'll still have a security officer follow you around until they find these guys."

"You are impossible, Max Malin!" she said as stared at me with defiance in her eyes. More than anything, I wanted to pull her into my arms and hold her tight because I knew how close she'd come to being harmed. The men who broke into the store were part of Dementyev's gang and Mrs.

Zakhrov had confirmed it for me. Her husband knew the major players in the Russian underworld and as a result, she was well informed on who belonged to whom.

"Lexi, please don't cop an attitude with me right now," I ordered. "I've got more than I can handle and this is just one of those things that is going to have to be."

"Cop an attitude with you? You have got to be kidding me!" she yelled. "I was the one who was here with those thugs! If anyone has the right to have an attitude, it's me!"

I knew she was right, but I also knew that I was absolutely right, too. We stood inches from each other in the office, staring into each other's eyes, waiting for one of us to back down, but neither did. I couldn't help but feel aroused by her anger and the longer I looked at her, the more aroused I got. We hadn't had time finish our tryst over breakfast and I'd walked away aching.

"Lexi..." I started. She looked gorgeous in the blue wrap dress she'd chosen for today and for once, she'd left her hair down. It flowed loosely past her shoulders and framed her face in a way that almost invited me to play with it.

"I'm mad at you!" she said, but I caught the hint of a smile flit across her lips before she regained control of her mad face.

"No you're not," I countered as I moved closer and wound a strand of loose hair around my finger as I gazed into her amber eyes.

"Yes... I am..." she gulped as I traced a light line down the side of her cheek with the tip of my finger. "I'm...um...mad."

"No, no you're not," I whispered as I leaned in and came within millimeters of her lips with mine. "You're not mad at all."

"I...oh...I..." she stammered as I cupped her face and leaned in to press my lips to hers. The softness of the kiss sparked an urgency in me that I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to control, and when she reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck, I knew we were headed somewhere fast and reckless.

I gripped her waist with one hand as I slid the other inside her dress and roughly pinched one of her nipples. She gasped and kissed me harder as I quickly slid the skirt of her dress up around her waist. She unzipped my pants, pulled out my swollen shaft, and began stroking it as I pushed my hand between her legs and shoved her panties to one side.

Our kiss intensified as we both worked each other into a frenzied state of arousal and soon, she had backed up so that she could perch herself on the edge of my desk and guide me between her legs. I could feel the heat radiating from her as she pulled me closer and positioned me so that one, quick thrust put me deep inside her wet warmth. I groaned and began

pumping my hips back and forth as I tried to hold back. I wanted to bring her with me, but the tension from this morning's play had built up inside me and after a few thrusts, I was lost in her tightness and couldn't stop myself.

"Oh, Max! Yes! Yes!" she moaned as she pushed her hips forward, meeting mine as I thrust into her over and over again. I could feel her tightening around me as she urged me on and soon, I felt the familiar rush of blood and the wave of coldness that raced through my veins as I let go and released inside of her. I gripped her tightly and rode the wave while I felt myself throbbing inside of her as she pulsed her hips and continued rocking. A few seconds later, I heard her moan softly and felt the warmth of her release as the wetness flowed and her inner muscles gripped and then loosened.

"You okay?" I asked as I held her close. I was afraid that I'd crossed some boundary and she'd now leave for good.

"Oh, Max, I'm better than good," she whispered into my chest as she continued to rock her hips. I could feel myself swelling again, and as I looked down at her, I wondered if I should continue. She answered my question when she whispered, "Yes."

The second time was less rushed and more languid. We easily fell into each other's rhythm and found a place where our lips mirrored the rest of our bodies and drove us back to the edge of pleasure for the second time.

She gripped my hair and kissed me hard as we both climaxed again, and I groaned into her mouth as I felt her pulling me deeper inside as she rocked back and forth. I kissed her deeply and felt her pressing against me.

"So," I whispered after we'd both started breathing normally again.

"How about that security detail?"

"Mr. Malin, you are absolutely incorrigible," she laughed softly. "Fine, but can you make them follow at a discreet distance? I just don't want to feel like I'm being tailed."

"I'll see what I can do," I said as I kissed her again.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Lexi

That afternoon, I met Viv over at the bridal shop to try on dresses. She was horrified to hear the tale of the morning's action and wanted to know what Max was doing to ensure my safety. I told her about the security detail and she nodded her approval.

"Damn right, he'd better hire someone to ensure your safety," she said as she pulled a fairytale confection off the rack and handed it to me. When I looked at her like she was crazy, she replied, "Just try it on. I want to see what it looks like on an actual human."

"Viv, you're nuts, you know that, right?" I asked as I handed the dress to the sales associate tasked with helping me find a dress and smiled as I rolled my eyes. She simply nodded and took the dress back to the massive room

they'd set aside for my shopping trip. I pulled a simple sheath dress off the rack and held it up for Viv to see. "What do you think of this?"

"Um, no. It's not fancy enough for what you're doing," she shook her head and handed me another dress, this time covered in lace and beadwork.

"These dresses are hideous," I whispered, hoping that the associate wouldn't hear me dissing her inventory. "Why are you asking me to try them on?"

"I told you, I want to see what these horrible confections look like on a normal human woman," she said as she scanned the rack for her next pick.

"You're evil," I told her as I pulled out another simple dress, this time a column with thin shoulder straps and a scooped neck that had a classic look to it. "How about this one?"

"Yeah, sure, try it on," she said as she yanked a hideous strapless dress with waves of tulle layered in a way that was sure to make the wearer look like a crazed ballerina. She gleefully cried, "And, this one!"

"Viv, stop picking out the ugly ones," I scolded. "We are here with a purpose and that purpose is to find me an appropriate dress. With the emphasis on the word appropriate."

"I know, I know," she said dropping her head and looking duly chastised. We browsed the racks in silence until she went to pull out one more dress.

"Viv..." I warned.

"No, seriously, look at this one," she said, holding it up. The dress was a fitted sheath held up by cap sleeves connected to gracefully draped lengths of fabric in back. The tasteful v-neck design was sexy, yet appropriate for a wedding, and the long skirt ended with a feathery frill at the very bottom and swept out into a short train that looked manageable. I nodded as she handed it to the sales associate.

We'd chosen a wide range of dresses for Viv's turn as fake maid of honor, and now, we headed back to the fitting rooms to see if we had anything that would work. First, I donned the hideous dresses that Viv had chosen. One after another, I groaned as I pulled them on and looked at myself in the mirror. Viv sat outside on a velvet couch laughing until tears poured down her cheeks. In any other situation, I would have killed Viv for doing this to me, but the humor helped alleviate the anxiety I was feeling, so I welcomed the respite.

"Alright, alright," Viv laughed as she wiped her eyes. "Just stop already!"

"This is all your fault, you know," I said as I stalked back into the dressing room, trying to kick the layers of tulle and netting out of my way and failing miserably. I pulled down the simple sheath dress and pulled it on. Looking at myself in the mirror, I smiled. This was much more my

style, though I doubted Viv was going to agree. I walked out and spun around.

"Too plain," she said waving her hand. "Need I remind you that you are marrying a billionaire?"

"Viv..." I said with a warning tone in my voice.

"Still, it's too plain," she repeated.

I went back into the fitting room and pulled the column dress. It looked a little less plain – more wedding and less summer picnic. I walked out and Viv let out a low wolf whistle.

"Now that one's a little more like it!" she exclaimed. The sales associate nodded as she moved to help me up onto the small platform in front of the mirror. "I like this one, Wally. You look sexy, but sophisticated in it. It's not too plain and not too fancy."

I stood on the platform looking at myself for a few moments before I stepped down and headed back to the fitting room for the last dress. When I pulled it on, I knew that it was the one. The dress fit me like a glove and the effect was stunning. I walked out of the dressing room and Viv's jaw dropped as I walked across the floor to the platform.

"Lexi, that's the one," she said with a reverence usually reserved for church. "That dress looks like it was made just for you."

"It doesn't look half bad, does it?" I asked as I turned around to see the back of the dress. "I look elegant and classy, don't I? This is just the type of thing a socialite would wear for her wedding, isn't it?"

"I don't know about that, Wally, but it's definitely you," she agreed. "And, you look amazing in it."

I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered where this was all headed. My desire for Max was exceeding anything I'd ever imagined, and he seemed to feel the same way. Maybe we had something real and could actually shape a real relationship for ourselves. Or maybe this farce of a wedding was pushing us in a direction that neither one of us would have ever gone. Maybe it was all just a fairytale and the prince was going to turn out to be one big fat frog.

I took another look, sighed, and decided to believe.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Max

It was hard to clear Lexi from my thoughts now that my office was filled with her scent and my mind was filled with images of what she looked like in the throes of passion. Twice in one day we'd amped things up, and I was lost in the memories of her body and the feel of her in my arms. A phone call from Feliks informing me that my father was demanding vengeance for my brother's death quickly brought me back to reality as I considered what my next steps would be.

I'd hired a security firm to guard the store and Lexi, but decided to forgo the protection for myself. If Dementyev and his thugs were going to come for me, there wasn't going to be a security detail alive that would stop them. Instead, I was going to go looking for them.

I closed the store early, stopped by the penthouse, and changed into a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and an old hoodie. I put on the steel-toed boots that Kristov had given me last Christmas as a joke. He'd decided that I needed to be a little more urban in my dress and had appointed himself the purveyor of urban fashion. He'd purchased several outfits for me and had them wrapped in plain brown paper and black ribbon. When I'd unwrapped the presents at our family's Christmas celebration, Papa had laughed heartily at the look of pure confusion that crossed my face. Kristov had patiently explained what each of the outfits was for, each more outlandish than the last, but the last one was the one he described as being "What you kill a thug in." I pulled it on and sent up a silent prayer for his soul.

I'd tracked Dementyev and his gang to a house on the West side, but I knew that the chances of finding them there were slim. Instead, I headed to the neighborhood dive a few blocks away from Ursus, sat down at the bar with a whiskey, and waited. The after work crowd began to filter in as I sat and sipped my drink and thought about what I would do once I found the man who had murdered my brother. I wanted to do what Papa had suggested: slowly torture the man to death as he begged for mercy or release. The thought of revenge gave me a sense of satisfaction, but it also made me sick thinking that I was turning into the very person that I'd tried so hard to avoid becoming – my father.

It wasn't long before Dementyev entered the bar with his guards. He was a tall man in his fifties who had the fair looks of someone with Nordic origins. His blond hair was cut in a tight, even square giving him a military aura, and he was dressed in casual clothing that looked anything but casual. Dementyev was a master of maintaining near invisibility by looking like he fit in anywhere, but having grown up in the *vore y zakone*, I recognized the way he carried himself immediately. The resemblance between he and my father was uncanny, despite the age difference, and I felt my stomach flip over as I prepared to confront him.

"Dementyev," I said as I stood up from my barstool and faced him. "We need to talk."

"Malinchenko, how nice to see you," he said with a smile that slithered across his lips. "Come into my office and we'll talk."

I nodded as I followed him to the back of the bar. I had my misgivings about whether this was a wise idea, but we certainly weren't going to hold our conversation in public, so I took the only option offered. Dementyev's office was smaller than the one I had at the store, and as a result, his men had to remain outside.

"I'm glad you came, Maksim," he said as he took out two shot glasses and a bottle of expensive Russian vodka that I knew for a fact could only be

bought on the black market. He poured two shots and offered me one saying, "Let us toast a productive conversation, shall we?"

We downed the shots and he poured two more. He handed me the glass as if daring me to say no; I accepted it without hesitation and downed it as quickly as the first.

"Let's talk," I said before he could pour a third, knowing that if he kept this up, I would soon be at a distinct disadvantage. "I want to know what is going on."

"What do you mean?" he asked as a small smile played at the edge of his lips. I knew I would have to proceed carefully or I'd soon be caught up in his web of lies and deception.

"You know what I mean, Dementyev," I said without humor. "What's going on with all the killings?"

"I haven't killed a single soul, so I don't really know what you're talking about." His long, thin fingers drumming the desk told me otherwise.

"There have been numerous executions here in Wicker Park," I said bluntly. "How many of them are your men responsible for?"

"Mr. Malinchenko, my men are not responsible for any of the murders here on the West Side," he said, leaning forward as his eyes sparkled and a cold smile spread across his lips. "Those were unfortunate thugs caught up in business I know nothing about. Perhaps, they deserved to die."

I wanted to fly out of my seat and pummel his smug face until he could no longer smile or even see, but good sense told me that this would be unwise and that if I did it, I'd most likely be dead within minutes. Instead, I leaned back and returned his smile as I acted like I had all the time in the world to have this discussion. What I wanted to know was whether he'd ordered Kristov killed and if he had, why.

"Perhaps they did," I said as I looked at my fingernails and then picked at something that wasn't there. "Perhaps they were simply bad apples who needed harvesting."

"Indeed," Dementyev smiled as he held up the vodka bottle offering another shot, I passed and watched him take a third shot as I thought about what to say next.

"Perhaps my brother was one of those bad apples," I threw out there and watched his eyebrows rise for a brief second before he regained control.

"Anything is possible, Malinchenko," he said, sitting back in his chair to look at me. "Are you asking if I killed your brother?"

"I am," I replied, thinking that it was better to admit what I was after than to dance around the subject with a man who had spent his life avoiding questions like these. "I just want to know who killed him. If not you, then who?"

"I did not kill your brother," he told me plainly. "It wasn't my men and it wasn't my order."

"Then, who did it?" I asked.

"Malinchenko, have you ever thought that about the fact that your father is knee deep in a river of shit?" Dementyev said with a cruel smile.

"He's been losing his grip on the *vore v zakone* for a few years now."

"So, you're saying that his own men killed his son." I was hesitant to believe anything that came out of his mouth, but I was smart enough to know that he was baiting me, so I stayed calm.

"Am I?" he shrugged. Dementyev had an infuriating way of bringing up a topic and then letting it hang in the air while he moved on to something else. It was in this way that he played with his victims much the same way a cat plays with an injured mouse; except, I wasn't injured and I definitely wasn't a mouse.

"Why would my father want my brother dead?" I asked.

"You really don't know anything, do you?" The look of surprise on his face struck me as the first genuine expression he'd had since we sat down.

"What should I know, Dementyev?" I said, trying to sound bored.

"Really, what don't I know?"

"Your brother was dealing drugs. He got in over his head and he owed money — not just a little money, but a lot of money," he said as he sat back

in his chair and laced his fingers together. "Your father is a businessman, a hardcore businessman who doesn't take shit from anybody, not even his own son."

"Okay, so Kristov owed money. Lots of people owe money, and my father doesn't kill them," I shrugged. Dementyev dropped his hands and leaned forward across his desk as he looked at me as if he were trying to decide what to say to me next.

"Yes, but most people don't go around pulling the whores from your father's whore houses and transporting them off to some place safe," he countered without taking his eyes off of my face.

"You lie." I felt my stomach turn over and threaten to upend its contents onto Dementyev's desk. "You fucking lie, you *sookin syn*! My father never ran whorehouses. Drugs, weapons, theft, yes, he did then all, but he never ran whorehouses."

The room was suddenly filled with Dementyev's loud laughter. He laughed until he had tears running down his face and his guards peeked into the room to see if everything was okay. He waved them off and wiped his eyes as he held back the new waves that threatened to tow him back under. When he'd calmed himself, he looked at me and said, "You poor fool; you have no idea what your father does, do you?"

"I don't find any of this particularly funny," I replied. "In case you've forgotten, my brother is dead."

"I'm laughing about the fact that your father has fooled you for so long," he told me as he poured two more shots and handed me one. I tossed it back quickly and waited for him to continue.

"Your father is a cold bastard. He was considered brutal even by KGB standards, but he operated by the thieves' code. Or at least, he did until he came to the States. They say that once he got here, his heart turned to ice. He's been the most dangerous man in Chicago for the past two decades, and now, he's losing his grip on power to the younger generation who have even less honor than he has, and he's panicking."

"Why should I believe a word you say?" I asked. I felt my pulse race as I listened to Dementyev tell me about my father. The fact that he was brutal wasn't a secret, but the brothels were. My mother had always accused my father of transporting girls into the U.S., but he had denied it until the day she died. He swore it was the one thing he wouldn't do. Now, Dementyev was telling me he'd lied about that, and it made me wonder what else he'd lied about, but I wasn't ready to buy the story just yet. "Show me some proof."

"I have none, just my word," he said as he looked at me. "But I'm telling you that I think your brother pissed off your father and your father

ordered a hit."

"You have no proof, yet you want me to turn on my own father?" I scoffed as I stood up and prepared to leave. "What a fool you must think I am."

"I do not think you are a fool, Maksim Malinchenko," he said soberly. "I think you are a boy who wants his father to love him and is doing everything he can to make that happen. I also think that your father is a cold, cruel bastard who doesn't deserve to have a son like you or one like Kristov, for that matter. I think he's a terrible man whose death would improve the world."

I stood looking at him for a long moment, wondering if he really did know my father or if he was doing what any good carnival fortuneteller does by reading the signs and then telling the listener what they want to hear. At the moment, the whiskey, the vodka, and the grief clouded my judgment, so I nodded and then turned and walked out of the bar.

I just hoped Dementyev would tell his men to back off and let me go in peace. Unlike my father had done.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Lexi

Two hours into my shopping trip with Viv, Peter called and told me to stop by the office because he had some news. I begged him to tell me what it was, but he said it was something that needed to be delivered in person, so I'd have to drop by to find out. I muttered a few choice curse words under my breath and told Viv that the trip needed to be cut short.

"What's up, Wally?" she asked.

"Peter has some kind of news for me, but he won't tell me over the phone," I replied as I shed the last dress Viv had brought into the fitting room. It was another of the big ugly dresses, and I had rolled my eyes and refused until she'd promised it would be the last one. It was truly hideous, and I was grateful to have a reason to take it off.

"Alright, well, I've got a makeover appointment scheduled for four, so this is perfect timing," she said as she changed out of the dove gray number I'd chosen as one of the possible bridesmaid dresses. I hadn't made her try on any ugly dresses and now I had a good idea of what I wanted her to wear. She held it up and said, "I kind of like this one, Lex."

"Yeah, me, too," I agreed as I pulled on my clothes and checked my hair. We put the bridesmaid dress and the one wedding dress that we'd loved on hold and said we'd be back over the weekend to make a final choice. The sales associate smiled, wrote the style numbers on my bridal card, and told me to let her know if I had any questions in the meantime.

Viv and I split on the sidewalk in front of the store. She'd refused a ride, saying she preferred to walk after being inside all day. I wanted to walk, too, but I was too impatient, so I hopped into a cab and directed the driver to Upper Wacker Drive and Peter's office. Once I arrived, I took the elevator up and told Peter's receptionist that I was there to see him.

"Oh, he's been waiting for you, Ms. Wallace!" she exclaimed as she led me back and announced, "Mr. Baxter, Ms. Wallace is here to see you!"

"Hey, kiddo!" he called from behind his desk. "Come on in and have a seat!"

"Hey, Peter," I said. I walked over and settled on one of the chairs across from his desk. "Tell me the news, would you, please?"

"Kid, the director of Hedda Gabler wants you in the role of Hedda," he blurted out. "You're going to be the lead role!"

"Who? Me?" I said stunned by the news. I had been hoping I'd get the part, but I hadn't allowed myself to completely believe it was possible because I didn't want to be disappointed.

"Yes, you," he said with a big smile. "You are the lead in the Ibsen play!"

"This is unbelievable!" I cried as I shot up out of the chair and danced in front of Peter's desk. "I did it!"

"Yep, and they want you to start next week," he said. "They're sending the script to your place and rehearsals begin on Monday and run through the next two months. And, they're paying you fifteen hundred a week plus benefits!"

"Wait, next week?" I said as a sick feeling swelled in the pit of my stomach. "What about my job with Max? I've still got a month to go."

"Aw, don't worry, kid. I'll find a replacement and have her in there on Monday morning," he waved me off trying to allay my worries.

"But, Peter, I've got responsibilities over there," I said, suddenly realizing that Peter had no idea how far I'd gone in helping Max out. He had no idea I was living at Max's apartment, nor did he know about the faux wedding we were planning.

"Look, kid, this is your chance to break into the Chicago acting scene," he scolded. He was frustrated with me – and rightfully so. "Why do you care what that Russian mafia prince does with a jewelry store?"

"Wait, what?" I said. I was confused. "What did you just call him?"

"Russian mafia prince? He's the son of Vladimir Malinchenko, the Wicker Park mafia boss. Didn't you know that?"

"No, how would I know that, Peter?" I shouted. "What the hell are you telling me? That I've been working for the Russian mafia? Jesus, Peter!"

"Calm down, Lexi," he said with a worried look on his face. "It's not a crisis. Nothing bad happened, did it? I'll get another girl to fill in and it'll all be over. Don't get your panties in a twist, kid."

"You are such an asshole," I said. I was beyond mad at him for putting me in such a situation and even angrier with myself for having dug in deeper. How in the world was I going to get out of this mess?

"Hey, hey, hey, let's not get personal here," he said as he looked at me with genuine concern. "What's going on, Lexi?"

"Nothing!" I yelled as I marched toward the door. "Absolutely nothing!"

I stormed out of Peter's office and headed to the lobby. As I crossed the marble floor toward the door, I caught a glimpse of a man following me at

just enough of a distance that it became obvious he was my security detail. I marched over to him and hissed, "Stop following me! You are fired!"

"You can't fire me, ma'am," he said not even pretending that he wasn't what I was accusing him of. "Mr. Malin hired me and he's the only one who can fire me."

"Don't you mean, Mr. Malinchenko?" I spit out in a venomous tone. "I don't care if he's the Leader of the Free World, you're fired! Do not follow me anymore or I'll call the police and have you arrested for stalking!"

He considered me for a moment before nodding, turning, and walking away. I turned and marched out the front door and headed back to Max's penthouse where I threw a few things in a bag for me and Anna before calling a cab and heading over to Viv's for the night.

If Max Malinchenko wasn't going to tell me the truth about who he was and what he was doing, then I sure as hell wasn't going to stick around to hear what new lies he'd come up with to make me help him rule his West side gang of thugs.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Max

On my way back from my meeting with Dementyev, I stopped at the store to pick up the special piece of jewelry I'd ordered for Lexi to wear. It was a three-carat platinum art deco ring that retailed for well over twenty thousand dollars, but I'd gotten a deal on it through Mr. Petrov's people. I wanted Lexi to start wearing it so that Petrov's people would see that we were serious about the wedding plans and would continue to funnel money into my business. I'd used up a good portion of the initial investment and I was hoping that Petrov's second infusion of cash would come soon so that I could buy more of the rare pieces that were out on the market. I knew the Chicago crowd would love them because they were vintage pieces that would remind them of the good old days back in Moscow.

I pulled the ring out of the safe and looked at it from all sides. It was exquisite, much like Lexi, and I knew she would love wearing it. I polished it and set it in one of our black boxes where it sparkled in the light. Satisfied that I'd done well, I called and ordered dinner to be delivered and then went out to the car.

When I stepped out of the elevator I was surprised to find the penthouse completely dark. "Lexi?" I called as I turned on lights and walked through the empty place. "Are you home? Anna?"

There was no response and I wondered if I'd missed a message from Lexi telling me that she'd gone out with Viv or something. I checked my phone and saw nothing and then began to worry. I quickly dialed Lexi's phone, but it went to voicemail, so I left a message asking her to call me and then called Viv. Her phone went to voicemail, as well.

I called the guard I'd put on Lexi to find out where she was. When he answered, he told me she'd fired him that afternoon after he'd tailed her to her agent's office on Upper Wacker.

"She what?" I yelled.

"She fired me."

"She didn't have the authority to do that!" I was pissed off and not holding back. "Your one job was to follow her and ensure her safety!"

"She threatened to call the police and report me for stalking her," he said simply. "And that's not in my contract."

"You idiot!" I shouted before disconnecting.

Lexi was out there on her own and when I tried calling her again, I got no response.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Lexi

I showed up at Viv's towing a suitcase and Anna's carrier. She didn't ask me a single question; she simply sat me down, mixed me a martini, and told me to drink. I finished one martini and she had a second in my hand before I could even ask for it.

"Talk, Wally," she said as she set a tray full of snacks down on the coffee table. "And, eat, otherwise you're going to spend the night on the floor in the bathroom."

"He lied to me, Viv," I said as I picked up a stuffed grape leaf and popped it in my mouth. After I'd swallowed, I continued, "He lied about who he was by omitting the fact that he is the son of Russian mafia boss Vladimir Malinchenko!"

"Holy shit! Are you kidding me?" she gasped, spilling her drink on the sofa. She quickly ran into the kitchen and grabbed a towel to wipe it up with before sitting down again. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not kidding, Viv!" I said. "Why do you think I'm here and not at the penthouse tonight?"

"How did you find out?"

I spent the next hour telling her all about what Peter had told me, and then I told her how I'd fired the security guard who'd been following me all day. While I was telling her about Max's secret, I remembered that I hadn't told her about my own secret.

"Viv, I got the part," I said quietly.

"You what?" she replied, looking up from playing with Anna, who was curled up in her lap on her back and batting at Viv's fingers.

"I got the part," I repeated. "I'm going to play Hedda Gabler. I got the part."

"Holy fuck, Wally!" Her shout scared Anna, who ran and hid under the dining room table. "You got the part! You're a star!"

"Hardly," I laughed. "I'm a mediocre actor in Chicago who is going to headline an Ibsen play. That's a little more accurate."

"Bullshit!" she exclaimed. "This calls for a celebration!"

"Viv, my life is ruined right now," I interjected as she ran into the kitchen and returned carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses. She popped the cork, poured the bubbly liquid, and handed me a glass.

"Let's celebrate," she said.

"My ruined life?"

"No, silly, let's celebrate your role on stage and the fact that you are now a working actor!" she clinked her glass against mine and sipped. I followed her lead and thought about what she'd said.

"Viv, what am I going to do?"

"Well, it seems to me that you have the perfect out, now," she observed. "You got the role and Peter is going to find a replacement for you, so there's really nothing to worry about, right?"

I sat silently, sipping my champagne as I thought about it.

"Wally, there's nothing to worry about, right?" she asked again.

"Well..." I said slowly, drawing my response out.

"Oh no, no, no, no, no!" she cried. "You've fallen for him!"

"Viv..." I shrugged.

"Yes, you've fallen for the billionaire Russian mafia guy!" she exclaimed. "You actually think he's going to fall for you and secretly hope that the fake wedding is real by the time it happens, don't you?"

"That sounds so cliché," I protested.

"That's because it is!" she yelled. "Jesus, Lexi, you can't fall for a guy who kills people who get in his way for a living!"

"Max isn't a killer!" I yelled back. "If he was, I'd know it by now."

"Right, and all those people who were taken in by con artists and fakes and lost their life savings knew, too," she said as she raised an eyebrow and looked at me. "Sex clouds everything, Lexi, and you've definitely been clouded when it comes to Mr. Malinchenko."

"That's not fair, Viv," I protested. "He's been nothing but good to me and he's never once done anything that put me in harm's way."

"Hello? Where the hell have you been, sister?" She was getting exasperated. "You were attacked in the store by the Russian junior mafia, and Max assigned a security guard to you!"

"That was different."

"Oh, you've got it bad, girlfriend," Viv shook her head in disbelief. "Look, I'm not going to try and talk you out of your schoolgirl crush on Malinchenko, but I am going to tell you that it's not healthy to hang on to a man who is a criminal! No good will come of it!"

"But, Viv!" I yelled. "I love him!"

She gasped and then fell back on the sofa holding her glass in one hand and draping her free arm over her forehead. She sat there in silence for a minute before she sat up and looked at me.

"Lexi, if you are, in fact, in love with this man, then you need to sort out the mess that this whole thing has become," she said seriously. "You need to go back and have a real conversation with him and find out what his intentions are because until you know that, all of this is just speculation and fantasy."

"What am I going to say to him?"

"I don't know, how about starting with the truth?" she replied with a smile. "Tell him how you feel and see what he says."

"And, if he says it's just a business deal gone awry, then what?" I asked.

"Then, you'll have your answer and know that you're taking things a little too seriously," she said with a shrug. She turned to look at me and asked, "But what if he says he feels the same way?"

"Huh?"

"What if he says he feels the same way and that all of this is real for him, too?" she repeated.

"I don't... I don't know," I stammered. It hadn't occurred to me that maybe Max did feel the same way I did and that maybe he'd respond in a positive way, rather than blowing me off. Then, I felt anxious. I turned to Viv and said, "What if he does like me?"

"What if he does?" She smiled as she sipped from her glass.

"Oh no, this can't happen!" I cried. "Not now! Not after Josh! It's too soon, Viv!"

"Hey, hey, hey, slow it down, Wally," she said as she leaned over and rested her hand on my arm. "What's so bad about having a rich, handsome guy fall for you?"

"Because I didn't plan for it!" I said. "It's not logical, and it makes no sense!"

"I think you're nuts," she said shaking her head. "Listen to yourself, of course there's never a good time for falling in love. Please. That's how this stuff works! It's life, Lexi! You don't get to control it all, you just have to roll with the punches and decide which ones to absorb and which ones to deflect. Sometimes you are so hard headed."

I sat thinking about what she had said until Anna hopped up into my lap. She sat staring at me as she raised a paw and patted my arm. When I didn't respond, she chirped and patted harder.

"What? What do you want?" I asked as I looked down at her fuzzy, gray face. She mewed loudly and head butted my arm before sitting back down and staring up at me. "Okay, fine. We'll go home and see what's on Max's mind. Fine."

Viv smiled as Anna purred loudly. This was going to be a difficult conversation, but maybe some good would come out of it.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Max

I decided that I needed to go visit Babi. I told my driver the destination, and then sat back as I thought about what Dementyev had said about Papa. I knew my father was a hard man, but to have ordered a hit on his own son was beyond the pale. Or was it? I wanted to talk to Babi and find out what was really going on with Papa.

When we pulled up in front of her building a little while later, I noticed that the house was dark, and I wondered if she was even home. Sometimes, Babi went out visiting and stayed the night at friends' houses when the hour got too late to get home safely. I knocked on the door and waited. When I got no response, I used my key to let myself in.

"Babi?" I called as I moved through the dark front room. "Babi, are you home?"

"Vladimir?" came the response from the kitchen. "Vladimir is that you?"

"Babi? What's going on?" I called as I raced to the kitchen and found her sitting curled up in a corner on the floor. "Babi! Are you okay?"

"Maksimka!" she cried as she stretched out her arms. I pulled her up off of the floor and sat her in a kitchen chair so I could check to see if she'd been injured.

"Babi, what happened?" I asked as I pushed the sleeves of her robe up so I could see her arms. There were fresh bruises that looked like someone had gripped her very hard, and I looked up at her and asked, "Where did these come from?"

"There were men here, Maksimka," she said in a grave voice. "They were very bad men looking for your father. They pushed me around and they looked for information, but they did not find it. I wouldn't let them."

"Babi, what are you talking about?" I asked as I got up and dug through the freezer until I found a couple of bags of frozen corn. I wrapped the bags in dishtowels and put them on the bruises. "Babi, what bad men? How did they get in? Who sent them?"

"Maksimka, your father has a lot of enemies," she said as she looked down at her arms. "He's been a target since he left Moscow, and now, they are out searching for him. "

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I know because a mother knows," she said looking back up at me. "I know because Vladimir warned me that these men would come looking for him and that I should never give him up."

"Babi, Kristov is dead," I blurted out. I had no idea what my father had told her and after my talk with Dementyev, I wasn't sure what was true.

"Kristov?" she asked. A look of confusion washed over her face.

"Kristov is dead?"

"Babi, he was executed in his home," I said. She looked at me and then shoved the ice packs off of her arms before bringing her hands up to cover her face. She shook as she tried to hold back sobs, but before long, she was wailing as the tears flowed.

"Not my Kristov!" she cried. "He was a little boy!"

"Babi, what happened with Papa?" I asked, trying to be gentle, but knowing that time was of the essence if I was going to figure out what had happened. "What did Papa tell you?"

"He told me that something bad was happening and that bad men were coming to find him, just like in Moscow," she told me as she gulped back the sobs. "He said they wanted to take everything away from him and kill his family and that I had to help him hide."

"Babi, why did he think that they were coming for him?" I asked.

"Maksimka, your father is not a bad man," she said as she looked up into my eyes. "He was just trying to do what he had to do to survive. Life wasn't easy for us after the wall fell. You know that. Your father did what he had to do to protect us."

"What did he do, Babi?"

"He got involved with some men who promised a way out of the country for you and your mother," she said as she tried to replace the ice packs on her arms. I reached out and repositioned them. "They got you all out of Moscow before the police came to try and arrest your father for desertion."

"Desertion?" I asked. "He always said he retired with honors from the KGB."

"Don't be stupid, Maksimka," she scolded. "No one retires from the KGB. You are KBG for life or you are dead. Your father deserted so he could relocate his family, and those who remained paid the price."

"You?" I asked afraid to hear what she would say.

"No, I was one of the lucky ones. I was able to hide with friends until your father could make arrangements to get me out of the country," she said. "But other family members were not so fortunate, and when the KGB came to extract information, some of them did not survive."

"That's barbaric," I breathed.

"You have no idea what barbaric is until you see the people you love slaughtered by a government that despises dissent," she sighed sadly. "I couldn't help them, no one could help them. So, I waited until your father sent word and then I trusted complete strangers to move me out of the country in the dead of night. I was loaded onto a truck carrying chicken carcasses to a farm in Poland and driven out of the country. It was disgusting – the smell of rotting chicken and death. But, it was better than staying and waiting for the police to come and question me."

"But you didn't do anything."

"Maksimka, you don't understand, you didn't have to do anything," she said. "You just had to be accused of doing something, that was good enough."

"But what about Papa?" I asked.

"Your Papa did what he had to do to make sure we were all safe," she said. The fierce look in her eyes told me that while my father might have done some terrible things, he did them with the intention of ensuring that those he loved would remain alive. "He made deals with the devil to get us to safety. Don't you ever judge him for that."

"I'm not judging, Babi," I said trying to soothe her anger. "I'm trying to understand why bad men came to your apartment and roughed you up!"

"I'm telling you, Maksimka!" she shouted. "Listen to me!"

"Okay, okay," I placated, holding my hands up in surrender. "I'm listening."

"Your father made deals with people to get us all out, and when he did, he had to promise them certain things," she continued. "Those things he promised to do did not have an expiration date, so he was obligated to do them forever. At first, it was easy things that didn't seem to make that much difference, but then as time went on, he was required to make concession after concession and he had to do things that he found morally wrong, but he did them because they reminded him that if he didn't, they would harm you and your mother and brother."

"But why didn't Papa tell the authorities in this country once he got here?"

"Don't be stupid, Maksimka," she said. "The Russian Mafia doesn't care about local authorities. They have no hold on how they do business, and if your father had reported them, they would have murdered us all without a thought. There was no escape, Maksimka. No escape."

"Your father did what he could to resist, but by the time he wanted out for good, he was in way too deep to try and leave. He had no choice. And, the time he did decide to try and get out, well, you saw what happened."

"No, what happened?" I asked. "I don't remember this time."

"Of course you remember that time!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.
"They murdered your mother!"

The revelation came as a complete shock, and I stared at my grandmother with my mouth hanging open for a full minute before she snapped, "Close your mouth, the flies will get in and make a home."

"Babi, they killed Mama?" I whispered. I was horrified not by the fact that my mother had been killed, but by the fact that all these years, I'd secretly suspected that my father had done it out of anger and jealousy.

"Yes, they killed your mother when she and your Papa had decided that they would go to the police about the girls being smuggled into the country," Babi said. "Your mother could handle a lot of the unsavory dealings that your father did to keep you all safe, but exploiting other human beings in the way that the mafia did with those girls was more than she could take. She said it was because they were someone's children and she could live with a lot of things, but not the abuse of someone's child. She begged and pleaded with your Papa until he gave in and agreed to go to the authorities and become a witness."

"Did he go?" I asked.

"No, he did not," she said. "The day he was supposed to meet with the Federal investigators, your mother was hit by a car as she walked home from the grocery store. Your Papa told me that he thought it was a terrible

accident until one of the *vory v zakone* showed up at the bar that night with a message from their captain. He told your Papa that if he ever said a word to anyone about the girls, you and Kristov would be next and that it would be no accident."

"They said they'd kill us?"

"Yes, they did," she said. "After that, your father made a vow to raise you and Kristov to be tough and to look out for yourselves. He didn't ever want either of you to be a victim of the promise he'd made."

"Babi, they killed Kristov," I said. "They went back on their promise. What am I supposed to do now? Sit back and let them run all over us?"

"Maksimka, your father and I are old. We have lived our lives. You are young, and you are the future of this family now that Kristov is dead," she said as she tipped the ice pack off of her arms and pulled me into a cold hug. "You have to do whatever you need to do to protect yourself. Even if that goes against what your Papa wants you to do. You need to make good choices and get out of the mafia life because if you are in it, you will not survive."

"How do I do that, Babi? I've been trying, but Papa keeps fighting me at every turn."

"Your Papa is a stubborn man." She smiled as she drew back and patted my cheek. "He was a stubborn boy who grew up to be a very stubborn man,

but he loves you more than anything in the world and he is fighting to protect you. Help him."

"Babi, I met with Aleksander Dementyev tonight," I said, wondering what she knew about him.

"Scum!" she said as she spit on the floor. "That man is disgusting human trash! He has no loyalty or honor!"

"He told me that Papa killed Kristov," I said quietly. "I almost believed him after the way that Papa has treated me."

"Maksimka, that man is the worst kind of thief there is," she said as her face contorted with anger and pain. "He lies and follows no code of honor. He manipulates people by using their pain to make them doubt themselves and everyone they love. He twists the truth and turns it into lies. He is sadistic and cruel. He has no soul."

"How do you know all of this about him?" I wondered what Dementyev had done to get this kind of response from her.

"I have seen his handiwork," she said with disgust. "Kristov brought some of the girls he was helping to escape here to stay with me while he arranged safe passage to somewhere that Dementyev would never find them, and I saw what he'd done to them. That man deserves to die a thousand deaths for what he's done."

"Wait, you were helping Kristov? Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded.

"Your brother didn't want you to get caught up in the dirty work, Maksimka," she said patting my cheek. "He was protecting you so that you could get out of the business."

"But he was telling me to get back into it!" I shouted. "What is going on in this family?"

"We take care of each other, Maksimka," she said. "Your Papa and Kristov were doing the best they could to draw you back in, but I prayed that you would stay away. I don't understand your Papa."

"What do I do now?" I said helplessly. "Papa wants me to find Kristov's killers and make them suffer. How am I supposed to do that if I'm supposed to stay away from the family business? Babi, what do I do?"

She looked at me for a long time before she got up from the chair and walked to the refrigerator. She pulled out the milk and eggs, and then she took down the flour and began mixing a batch of crepes. I watched while she cooked, not saying a word, knowing that she was thinking and that the cooking was an integral part of her thought process. When she had flipped the last of the crepes onto the large blue plate she'd pulled out of the cabinet, she brought it over with a dish of jelly, some fresh fruit compote, and a container of sour cream and set them all down in front of me.

"Eat," she ordered as she began to clean up. "Eat, Maksim. It's good for you. You eat and then you'll know what to do."

Babi was right. By the time I was done eating the crepes, I knew exactly what I needed to do next. I kissed her on the cheek, went out to the car, and ordered the driver to take me home.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Lexi

I put Anna in her carrier as Viv called a cab for me. At the door, she hugged me tightly and kissed my forehead before she saluted.

"Go get your man, Wally!" she laughed.

"I'll do my best," I grinned as I walked to the elevator and headed down to meet my taxi. On the ground floor, I crossed the lobby and said goodnight to the doorman before heading out to the curb. The taxi was waiting and while I briefly wondered how the driver had gotten here so quickly, I wrote it off to the competition between drivers and was grateful that he'd shown up so fast. I asked the driver to load my bag into the trunk as I pushed Anna's carrier into the backseat and then slid in beside her. I gave the driver my address, but he didn't acknowledge me. I tapped on the Plexiglas divider and said the address again. Still no response.

"Excuse me? Excuse me!" I shouted at the driver who refused to turn and look at me. "Did you hear me? I said I'm going to sixty-five Goethe Street!"

"You're going where I tell you you're going, so shut the fuck up and sit down!" came the reply. I felt like I'd been punched. And then, the panic set in as I tried to open the car door and found it securely locked.

"Oh no, you're not getting out, little lady," the driver laughed. "You're coming with me."

"Let me out! Let me out!" I shouted as I pounded on the window hoping that someone on the outside would see me and stop the cab. "You can't keep me in here! Let me out!"

"Shut the fuck up," the driver said as we reached a stoplight and he turned to point a pistol at my head. "I hate stupid women who don't know when to shut up, so I'm not opposed to silencing you. Hand over the phone."

I shrank back in the seat and stared at the barrel of the gun with wide eyes. Anna paced in her carrier, mewling at me to let her out as I dug into my purse. I wanted to resist, but my common sense took over and I handed the man my phone

"Shut that fucking cat up," he demanded. "I hate those fucking things. They're sneaky – just like women."

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, trying to keep the rising panic out of my voice. I had no idea who this man was or what he wanted from me.

"You'll see when you get there," he said before tossing me a mask and yelling, "Now put that damn thing on and shut the fuck up!"

I sank into the backseat as I pulled the mask over my eyes before quietly opening Anna's cage so that I could pet her. She seemed to understand the situation and silently climbed onto my lap. I held her close and petted her head as I thought about Max. I suddenly regretted my foolish outburst in the lobby of Peter's building. Had I not fired the security guard Max had hired, I might not be in this situation. I cursed myself as I felt the tears welling up.

Eventually, the cab pulled into a garage and I could hear the doors being quickly pulled down. The cab door opened, and a hand grabbed my arm, roughly pulling me out of the car. I was startled and Anna responded by jumping out of my arms. I heard a gun go off, and I screamed thinking they'd shot her.

"You heartless bastards!" I shouted as I began to cry. "She's a baby! You shot a baby!"

"Shut up!" a voice near my ear warned. "Or you'll be next."

I ground my teeth together so hard that I was certain I would crack one or two as I was shoved forward and told to walk. The hand on my arm

gripped me tightly, and I felt the cold metal of a gun pressed against my right temple as I walked. My stomach roiled and I was afraid that I was going to vomit, so I swallowed hard and tried to calm myself by breathing deeply.

When we reached a doorway, I heard a lock click and felt the breeze from the door opening as the hand on my arm shoved me forward. I went flying across the room and landed hard. Something padded broke my fall, and the voice said, "You can take the mask off if you want, but I'd recommend that you stay really fucking quiet or else I'll have to silence you."

I nodded miserably as I reached up and pulled off the mask so I could look around. The room was no more than six by six feet and was made of cinder blocks with one small window at the top of the wall. It was large enough that I thought I might be able to squeeze out of it, if I could manage to boost myself up high enough. The walls had been painted numerous times, as evidenced by the layers of paint that had been chipped away, leaving a rainbow of colors in various places. The floor was cement and looked like it had been scrubbed to try and remove what looked like bloodstains that spread out across it. There was a drain in the center of the room, and after looking once, I tried to avoid repeating my mistake as it confirmed that the stains on the floor were, in fact, blood. I looked down

and realized I was laying spread across a dirty mattress, covered in who knew what. I quickly pushed myself up off of it and walked to the far corner of the small room. I pressed my back into the corner and sunk down facing the door.

I had no idea where I was or what these men wanted from me. All I knew was that no one had any idea where I was and that these horrible men had murdered Anna. I began to cry silent tears for my little kitten and then for myself.

"Aw, don't cry, little girl," a voice at the door said in mock sympathy. I looked up and saw a tall man with a blond crew cut dressed in jeans and an army jacket zipped to the neck. He was casually holding a large hunting knife in one hand and when I saw it, my blood turned to ice in my veins as my eyes dropped to the stained cement floor. "That's it. Connect the dots, little girl."

I was frozen on the ground, knowing that I had no chance of escape and that this man was most likely going to butcher me and dispose of my body so that no one ever knew what had happened to me. The tears continued to flow as I tried to accept my fate.

"Oh, I'm not going to cut you up, if that's what you're afraid of," he laughed. "Don't be foolish, little girl. You're a valuable commodity."

I looked up into his cold blue eyes and my first thought was how different they were from Max's warm ones. This man looked like he could cut diamonds with his stare, and I quickly looked away.

"No, no, look up at me!" he said in an encouraging tone. "I want you to look at me while I film you pleading for your life."

"But...but you said you weren't going to hurt me," I whispered.

"I might or I might not, depending on how good you play this role," he said as he examined his nails and then used the knife to remove something from underneath one of them. "You're an actress, aren't you?"

"Y...yes," I stammered.

"Then you'll do the best acting job of your life or you will die. Are we clear?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone. I nodded as he grinned and brought out my cell phone. "Now, I'm going to use your phone to record your plea, so make it good because this is what Malinchenko is going to get. You need to tell him to cooperate or we will kill you. It's pretty simple. Ready?"

He turned the phone's camera on and began recording with the light shining brightly into my eyes. I swallowed hard and began speaking, "Please, Max, they're going to kill me. Please, help me! They already killed Anna and now they said they're going to kill me if you don't give them what

they want! Please, help me!" By the end of my plea, I was crying hard as the tears flowed down my cheeks and I sobbed for Max to help me.

The man shut off the camera and nodded, "Good job. But who is this Anna we killed? I don't remember anyone else being brought in with you."

"My kitten!" I sobbed. "He shot my kitten! She was just a baby!"

"Oh, well, good," he said as he brought up a wad of spit from his throat and hocked it on the ground. "Cats are filthy animals. It's better for all of us that she's dead before she became an adult."

He turned and walked out of the door, slamming it shut behind him.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Max

I'd only been home a few minutes when the doorman rang and said he had a package for me. I told him to send it up in the elevator and when the doors slid open I found a small cardboard box with my name and address written in block letters on top. There was no postage or return address, so I took it to the kitchen and carefully examined it.

It didn't look like any explosives had been attached to the box, so I lifted the lid and inside, I found Lexi's phone. My heart dropped to my stomach as I picked it up and pressed the power button. Once the phone was powered up, I read the instructions that had been typed on the home screen and played the video.

When the camera came on I saw Lexi huddled in the corner of a room with what looked like cinder block walls. She looked small and very scared

as she looked up at the camera and begged, "Please, Max, they're going to kill me. Please, help me! They already killed Anna and now they said they're going to kill me if you don't give them what they want! Please, help me!" For a moment, a black rage descended and I wanted to murder anyone and everyone who was connected with her kidnapping.

The video feed returned with the camera pointed at an empty chair in a wood-paneled room that had the old Soviet Union flag pinned to the wall. I watched for a moment, and then Aleksander Dementyev walked into the frame and sat down. His slimy smile spread across his face as he prepared to speak. I wanted to murder him.

"Malinchenko, I imagine that right about now, you want to murder me," he laughed. "You wouldn't be a man if you didn't, but that's not why I'm here. I'm here to claim what's rightfully mine and if it means that I have to use a bit of incentive to get it, then so be it. You might wonder what a man like me could possibly want, since I have everything any man could desire. I have money, power, and immunity from prosecution under diplomatic law.

"So, I'll tell you what I want. I want your father to pay for his crimes against the state and against his fellow *vory v zakone*. I want the head of Vladimir Malinchenko, and once I get it, I will be happy to return the little American actress to her proper place."

Dementyev's laughter filled the small room as he reached out and accepted the glass of vodka offered by a disembodied hand. Then, he continued, "You have exactly twenty-four hours to bring me Vladimir or I will cut up that pretty little girl and spread her out across this city so that you will never be able to find her again. I hope that you understand that this is nothing personal with you, my friend. It's an old debt that must be paid." He accepted a second glass of vodka, raised it toward the camera, and declared, "*Za vashee zdaróvye!*" before downing it and slamming the glass on the desk.

"Twenty-four hours, my friend," he said as he flashed a sinister grin and the screen went dark.

"You bastard," I hissed as I clenched my fist and then slammed it down on the patio table, shattering the glass top and sending everything on the table crashing to the ground. I stood up and paced the length of the balcony as I thought about what my next move would be. He wanted me to turn Papa over to him, and no matter what my father had done, there was no way I was going to do that. Or was there?

I stormed back into the penthouse, grabbed my phone, and dialed my father. When no one answered, I swore a blue streak as I ran back to my bedroom and changed into a black t-shirt, black jeans, and a black hoodie.

I wasn't sure how I was going to do this, but I was going to rescue Lexi.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Lexi

Despite the small window, I quickly lost track of how long I'd been the small cement room. I cried myself to sleep in the corner and when I woke up, I saw that the kidnappers had left a tray of food just inside the door. I crawled over to it and then pulled it back to my corner.

They'd given me some soup that was now cold and a thick slice of rye bread. There was also a cold bottle of water and an apple on the tray, and I laughed a little at the notion that these ruthless kidnappers had somehow decided to provide me with a balanced meal. Suddenly, the memory of Anna in my arms came crashing back in and I dissolved into tears again. These awful men had killed a small, defenseless kitten. It didn't get any colder than that, so I hardened my heart and ate what I could of the food

they'd given me. I would keep up my strength and then when the time came, I would find a way to break out. I would save myself.

As I was finishing my meal, the door swung open and the same blond man walked in, only this time he was carrying a gun. I cringed before I could stop myself and then lifted my head and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Oh, you are a brave little girl, aren't you?" he said as he moved closer. There was something so sinister about him that I could smell it.

"Perhaps, I am," I said as I set my jaw and prepared for him to shoot me. If I was going to die, it wasn't going to be cringing in the corner.

"You think I'm going to shoot you, don't you?" he asked as he moved away and kicked the dirty mattress, causing a cloud of dust and who knows what else to fly up out of it. I felt the food in my stomach shift and I swallowed hard to keep it where it was.

"I think you're going to do whatever it is that people like you do," I replied.

"You think I'm a monster, don't you?" he asked as he turned and looked out the door. "You think I have no feelings."

"I think you're whatever you think you are," I countered. "I don't really care what that is because to me, you're nothing."

"Oh, little girl," he laughed in the way that adults laugh at children. "You are so very wrong about that. So very, very wrong."

An instant later, he was squatting down next to me with his hand wrapped around my neck, squeezing off my air supply. I choked and gasped, but his hand tightened and I couldn't draw air into my lungs. His face was inches from mine as he watched me struggle like a fish out of water, and his smile grew wider, but colder as I felt the blackness encroaching around the edges of my sight.

Instinctively, I reached up and tried to pry his hands from my neck, but that made him squeeze harder and the darkness threatened to consume me. I stopped struggling and began to focus on trying to take a breath. As I calmed myself, he loosened his grasp enough to let a small trickle of air into my lungs, and I almost cried with relief.

"See, when you're a good girl, I let you breathe," he whispered into my ear as he tightened his hold once again, cutting off my air. This time, I sat completely still and waited as I counted as high as I could go. Soon, he loosened his grip and I blew out what was in my lungs and sucked as much fresh air in as possible expecting him to play this game again. Instead, he let go completely and stood up. "You see how this works, little girl? I have the power to determine whether you live or die."

I nodded as I tried to slow my panicked breathing and return my pulse to normal. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten to me, but he already knew he had. It was his entire aim. He would unsettle me and make me grateful for his willingness to allow me to breathe. I'd learned this in a psychology class that Josh and I had taken our senior year, and now, I wracked my brain trying to remember what our professor had said about psychopaths who had a God complex.

"You aren't going to make it out of here alive, you know?" he said quietly. "It doesn't matter what Malinchenko does, I'm going to slit your throat and watch your blood flow down the drain. Like I've done with countless other women before you."

"Oh goody," I said flatly. "Thanks for letting me know the plan. It's so comforting."

"Your sarcasm is duly noted," he grinned. "It won't save you, but it will certainly make my time with you more interesting."

With that, he lifted the gun and pointed it right at me. There was something freeing about staring down the barrel of a semi-automatic weapon knowing that I wasn't going to get shot. "You're not screaming or crying," he said, sounding disappointed.

"That's because you just told me that you're going to slit my throat and watch the blood go down the drain," I said in a dull voice. "I felt fairly

certain that you'd stick to the plan."

"You're a smart little girl," he told me as he lowered the gun and flashed me a smile that chilled my soul. "This will be so much fun when we get to the end of the road."

He turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Only once I heard the click of the lock turning back in place and his boots echoing in the hallway did I let my tears fall fast and hard.

"Find me, Max," I whispered to no one. "Please come find me."

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Max

Since I'd gotten no answer at Papa's house, I had the driver take me to Ursus, thinking that he was probably there hanging out with his *bratán*, despite the fact that the doctor had told him to stay home and rest. When we pulled up in front of the bar, I noticed that there were men stationed outside.

"What's going on?" I asked the one closest to the door.

"Vladimir is here," he said and then tipped his head, indicating that I should go inside and see him. All eyes were on me as I entered the bar and looked toward the back room. The crowd of men parted as I slowly walked toward where my father sat with his closest advisors. They were all protected by his men, and the one in charge patted me down whispering, "Sorry, Maksim, I have to." I nodded to indicate that I didn't take it

personally as one of the other men held open the door to the back room and motioned for me to enter.

"Maksim," my father said as I walked through the door. "I am glad you're here."

"Papa-" I began.

"Enough, I know what's going on," he said holding up a hand indicating that I should listen rather than talk. "Maksim, I know what that *sookin syn* Dementyev wants and I know what needs to be done. I am prepared to go with you and trade myself for this Miss Wallace. I can't guarantee that she will be safe, but I will do everything in my power to ensure that she makes it out alive."

"Papa, why is he doing this? What is going on?" I asked as I searched my father's face for an answer.

"It is an old grudge, Maksimka," my father said. "One that began many, many years ago and one that Dementyev has never been able to put to rest. Now, he seeks revenge for a slight that he thinks is my fault, but really is not."

"What does he think you did to him, Papa?" I moved around the table and sat down in the chair next to him. "What on earth could have possibly caused him to decide that hurting Lexi would make things even?"

"Maksim, there are many things in this world that happen in the course of a lifetime," he sighed. "Things that you don't know will have any kind of consequence until years later. And, things that are so small that you don't even notice that you're doing them, but those small things become big things for someone else and years of nurturing the resentment and hurt create a home for the wound to fester and become filled with the pus of rage and anger. Dementyev is trying to lance the boil of his anger, and I am his target. Miss Wallace was an unfortunate bystander in his plan."

"This is insane, Papa. What on earth could you have done to cause this level of anger?" I pressed as I reached out and rested my hand on his arm. Papa turned and looked at me. He raised his hand and I flinched, thinking he was going to slap me for being too nosy; instead, he laid his hand on my cheek and smiled sadly.

"I'm sorry, Maksimka," he said quietly. "I was never a very good father. I left the job of raising you and Kristov to your mother and she did an astounding job of it, considering that she mostly did it alone. I'm sorry I've been a terrible father. I did the best I could, but I recognize now that it was never enough."

"Papa, what are you talking about?" I could feel the fear welling up inside me. After my conversation with Babi, I knew that Papa knew

something that he wasn't sharing with me and what he was doing felt suspiciously like saying goodbye. "What is going on?"

"We need to trade with Dementyev, Maksim," he said plainly. Papa looked up at Feliks, who nodded and quickly left the room. I was confused.

"You're not going to meet with that madman, are you?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," he said as he pushed himself up out of the chair and stood towering over me. "A real man takes responsibility for his mistakes and doesn't let the innocent suffer in his place, Maksimka. I am going to go meet with the man and get him to release Miss Wallace."

"But, Papa, if you go meet with him he's going to kill you," I protested. "He has no intention of negotiating or hearing your apology, he simply wants revenge for whatever it was that you did to him years ago. He will kill you."

"He might," he shrugged. "Then again, he might listen to me. I won't know until I try, and I can't leave Miss Wallace there to suffer the consequences of my actions, you know?"

"Let me go with you, then," I insisted. "I can help negotiate the meeting and make sure that he doesn't intend to cause you any harm."

Papa burst into laughter as I spoke. He looked at Feliks, who had returned, and said, "Do you hear him? My son says he will protect me from

that maniac Dementyev! I have a good son, Feliks!" Feliks nodded and smiled at me as he signaled to Papa that it was time to leave.

Papa nodded and followed him out to the car where he waved me off saying, "I take care of my own business, Maksim. I don't send my son to take care of what is mine and only mine. But bless you for trying." With that, Papa slammed the door shut and waved goodbye.

#

I ran to my car and hopped in back, telling my driver to follow Papa's vehicle from a distance, and we drove through the darkened streets of Wicker Park. It wasn't long before we pulled up near a run-down warehouse in a seedy section of the city. There were weeds growing several feet high around the place and with all of the trash piled up around the edges of the building, it looked like no one had entered it for a long time.

We parked a discreet distance away and I watched as Papa got out and crossed the parking lot to a door in back. He knocked and stood there for a minute before the door swung open and a hand reached out and grabbed him, roughly pulling him inside. I quickly opened my door and made a move to get out and run across the parking lot, but a hand on my shoulder stopped me.

"Don't do it, Maksim," Feliks said, shaking his head. "Vladimir needs to take care of this himself and if you go blazing in there, it will humiliate him in the eyes of the *vory v zakone* and his *bratán*. Let him try to talk some sense into that maniac, Dementyev."

"But you can't let him go in there alone!" I shouted.

"We didn't," Feliks grinned as he patted me on the shoulder. "Your father has been sending moles into Dementyev's organization for years, and most of the men on the inside right now are part of your father's organization, not Dementyev's. We're crazy, but we're not stupid, Maksimka."

"You are all insane," I exhaled. "But what about Lexi? What about her safety? How is she supposed to know who is good and who is bad? And where is she, anyway? I need to find her!"

"We have no idea where she is," he admitted. "Vladimir is going in to see what he can find out about the situation. Hopefully, he can convince Dementyev to release Miss Wallace without having to play his hand, but if he has to, it could get ugly. Your father can't get what we need, then Miss Wallace may be collateral damage."

"Collateral damage? Collateral damage? You guys are assholes! She's not collateral damage! We need to figure out where they're keeping her!" I yelled as I stormed off. Feliks didn't try to stop me.

“It’s the price of business, Maksimka!” he called after me.

The building was enormous and there was no way to figure out where they might be keeping her without inside information. I ran a hand through my hair as I cursed under my breath and when I looked up, I saw something moving in the weeds on the far side of the building. It stopped and then started again. Thinking it might be a stray animal that had found a way into the building, I wondered if I followed it whether I could find a way in so that I could search for Lexi. Keeping my eye on the moving weeds, I ran around the back of the building and waited to see where the stray would go next.

"C'mon, c'mon, show me a way in," I said in a low voice. At that moment, a small animal came bursting out of the weeds headed straight for me. It looked like a rabid rat, and I backed up prepared to stomp on it if it got too close, but then I heard a familiar chirp. I shook my head, thinking I was imagining things, and I heard it again. There was a small but distinct chirp coming from the rat that was rushing toward me. "Anna?" I called wondering if I was officially crazy. "Is that you, little girl?"

She flung herself at my leg and head butted my foot as she purred furiously. I bent down and scooped up the dirty, wet kitten and held her up to the light. "What are you doing here, little one?" I asked as she reached out and patted my face. "Lexi's here, isn't she?"

Anna chirped and patted me a few more times before I decided to put her down and see where she'd go. She quickly turned and led me to a wall that had a row of windows at chin height for me. I peered into the first one. It was dark and empty, as were the next three, but when I looked into the fourth one, I knew I'd hit pay dirt. Lexi!

"Lexi! Lexi!" I whispered loudly, afraid that if I shouted, I'd attract the attention of the guards on the inside. I was aware that there might be patrols placed on the outside of the building, but I since I hadn't seen any while observing, I assumed that the forces were gathered inside with my father.

"Lexi!"

"Max?" I heard a voice call out. "Is that you? Max? Or am I hallucinating?"

"It's me, Lexi! I'm here to get you out! I'm coming!" I assured her as I looked around for something I could use to break the window frame with. I dug through the weeds, coming up with a host of useless items before realizing that there was probably a tire iron in the trunk of my car. I raced back and popped the trunk, grabbed the tire iron, and called to Feliks, "I found Lexi, I'm going to get her out of there!"

"Max, wait! No!" he yelled as I took off running back to the window.

I made quick work of the window frame and soon smashed the glass that kept Lexi trapped inside the room. I reached my hand inside and

whispered, "Grab my hand, I'll pull you out!"

Just as I felt her fingers closing around mine, a voice from behind me said, "Oh no, no, Malinchencko. That's not how this works," as a pair of hands grabbed my arms and wrenched them around behind me. I heard Lexi let out a terrified scream just before the world went dark.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Lexi

As I lay on the floor trying to fight back the tears, I thought I heard Max's voice. I shook my head as I reminded myself that no one had any idea where I was and that there was no way he could have found me. I was imagining things that were never going to happen, and I should simply prepare myself for the moment the crazy blond man came back and slit my throat just to watch me bleed to death. This set off a new wave of tears and I choked back sobs as I tried not to picture my own death.

"Lexi! Lexi!" I lifted my head and listened carefully. "Lexi!"

"Max?" I called back. "Is that you? Max? Or am I hallucinating?" I was afraid to dare to hope that Max had come to rescue me, but I also knew that it was what I wanted more than anything. Max called back that he was going to find a way to break the window and get me out before he

disappeared again. I wasn't sure if I could trust what I thought I'd heard, so I dropped my head and tried to call up all of the happiest moments with Max. Doing this brought images of Anna to mind and again, I began sobbing as I recalled how callous and cruel the man who'd shot her had been.

A few minutes later, I heard Max outside the window pounding on the frame with something metal, and after a few minutes, the window broke and air came streaming in. I looked up expecting to see Max peeking over the edge of the windowsill and instead, I saw a pair of beady eyes and a lecherous grin looking down at me. I recoiled in horror and pressed myself against tightly against the wall.

"Your boyfriend is out cold, little girl," he cackled. "Did you think he was going to rescue his damsel in distress? He's an idiot who deserves to die."

"No!" I cried as I reached out toward window.

"Aw, sit down and shut up, *suka*," he spat. "No one wants to hear your pitiful wailing."

He disappeared, and I could hear sounds of a body being dragged across the hard ground getting further and further from the window. "Oh, Max," I whispered. "Please be okay." I dropped my head into my hands and began crying silently. All hope was lost. Now, we were both going to die at the hands of a mad man. Suddenly, I heard a small familiar sound. It

seemed so out of place here in this dark cold dungeon that I assumed it was my imagination, but the second time I heard it, I looked up to find Anna perched on the edge of the window, looking down at me and chirping. Her fur was wet and incredibly filthy, but she was alive.

"Anna!" I cried quietly. "You're alive!" She chirped and head butted the cement bricks as if to encourage me to join her on the ledge. "I can't get up that far by myself, little one," I said shaking my head. She chirped more urgently as she paced the ledge so I stood up and reached up to pet her. She head butted my hand and began purring, and I began crying again. "I'm never getting out of here, Anna. You need to go somewhere safe and hide. Find a nice family to take care of you. I love you, little girl."

Anna shot me a look as she turned and hopped off of the ledge and disappeared from view. I felt my spirit drop as I watched the window, waiting for her to return. After a few minutes, I gave into the fact that she'd done what I'd asked and had disappeared to go hide somewhere safe. I tried not to feel sorry for myself, but I did. I wanted my life back! I wanted Anna and Max and our happy life at the store and in the penthouse. I didn't want to die on a dirty mattress in a cold, dark room.

"Anna? Max?" I called softly. "Come back! Don't leave me!"

The silence was deafening.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Max

I came to with my face pressed to the concrete floor listening to Papa and Dementyev arguing. They were circling each other as they yelled at the top of their lungs about old grudges, but I couldn't tell who had the upper hand. I didn't want to alert them that I was conscious, so I lay there trying to get a sense of where we were before I played my hand. I could see the outer walls of the warehouse, and from where I lay, I could see a long hallway that stretched out toward the back of the building. I wondered if that was where they were keeping Lexi.

I started forming a plan as first Papa, then Dementyev, moved close to me. I wasn't sure if they were planning to fight or if this was just part of their Russian drama playing out, but as I watched them circle close to me and then away from me, I knew exactly what I was going to do. When Papa

circled around near me again, I quickly tapped his shoe to let him know I was conscious. He didn't bat an eye as he limped back around the circle, but this time when Dementyev circled close to me, I quickly reached out and yanked both of his feet out from underneath him, sending him sprawling to the ground.

"*Nu vse, tebe pizda!*" Dementyev swore as he tried to regain his footing. I reached out and pulled his feet back, sending him sprawling to the ground again, before I jumped on top of him and began punching him mercilessly. He frantically tried to push me off as he threw wild punches that missed their mark. He was yelling at his men, "Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!" I landed a punch to his gut, and he gasped for air like a fish out of water.

"Stay down!" I ordered as I wrapped my hands around his neck and squeezed.

None of the men moved a muscle as Papa limped over to where Dementyev lay on the ground, looked at him, and then spit on his face as he swore, "*Zhopa!*" Papa moved across the room before he nodded to the men and they moved in to lift me off of Dementyev and pulled him off the floor. He had a wild look in his eyes as if he didn't quite understand what was happening.

"What the fuck is going on? Sacha! Boris! What the fuck are you doing?" he demanded as the men pulled his arms behind him and secured

them with cuffs. "You can't do this to me, Malinchenko! I will not stand for this!"

"Stop your screaming, Dementyev," Papa ordered. His voice had a cold, metallic sound to it, and I shivered as I listened to him speak. "You are a blight on the earth. You are a terrible man, who has done many terrible things. I don't believe you deserve to live, but this choice is not up to me. I'm going to leave this choice up to the people you have hurt. The people you have terrorized. They will decide what is to be done with you. And, once they do, I will abide by their decision; but first, you will receive the tattoo of the *krysa*. Then, you will leave this city and never return. Do you understand me?"

"You *sookin syn!*" Dementyev screamed. "You can't do this to me! You can't tattoo me and send me into exile for your own crimes! I won't stand for it, you lying, cheating bastard! Your wife was a whore, and your son was a bastard!"

Papa calmly walked over to where the two men Dementyev had been his loyal followers were holding him. He calmly looked at the other man and he flicked open a large switchblade that I hadn't seen him carrying. The sound of the knife blade reaching its full length sliced through Dementyev's insults and my father pushed the tip against the man's abdomen as he spoke in a voice that only I knew how much anger it contained, "You will never

again speak of my wife or my sons. If you do, I will slice you open like a useless sewer rat and will gut and skin you without a thought. Do you understand me, *zhopa*?"

When Dementyev didn't respond, Papa pressed the tip of the knife into his abdomen with more force and repeated, "Do you understand me?" Dementyev looked at my father defiantly before he spit in his face. Papa made quick work of the man's shirt, then looked the two holding him and said, "Take him to the car. Feliks will take care of the tattoo." Then men nodded and dragged Dementyev out screaming.

I looked at Papa with wide eyes, unsure of how to respond to what I knew what a show of strength that would put him squarely back in charge of the *bratán*. He smiled at me as he patted my arm and said, "Go find Miss Wallace and get her out of this hellhole."

I turned and ran down the hallway to the only door that was closed. I pulled it open and found a terrified Lexi cowering in a corner. She screamed, "Get away from me!" as I charged in.

"Lexi, Lexi, it's me, Max," I said, abruptly stopping and standing stock still until she could process that it was in fact me.

"Max?" she whispered. "Did you come to rescue me?"

"Damn right, I did," I said as I reached down and gathered her in my arms, lifting her up off of the cold floor. "There wasn't any way I was going

to lose my best sales associate to a Russian mobster. It's really damn hard to find good help."

Lexi wrapped her arms around my neck and rested her head on my shoulder as I walked out of the horrible cell and took her to the car. Halfway there she raised her head and called, "*STOYA!* Anna! Anna! Don't leave Anna behind! She saved me, Max. She found me," she dissolved into tears as she buried her face in my neck, crying, "I thought they'd killed her!"

"She led me to you, Lexi," I said. "Anna found me and showed me where you were. She'd never left you."

"Find her, Max. Don't let her stay out here alone," she cried.

I took Lexi to the car and then ran back around to the back of the building where I found the kitten pacing and chirping. I reached down, picked her up, and tucked her under my chin as she butted me with her filthy, little head. I smiled as I told her, "Lexi is going to be so happy to see you, little girl." I squeezed her a little tighter and whispered, "Thank you for showing me the way." Her reply was a purr followed by a long stream of drool as I laughed.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Lexi

Max's driver quickly spirited us back to the penthouse, where I shed my clothes and sunk into a hot bubble bath. We hadn't said much on the drive home. Instead, both of us had lavished attention on Anna who had walked between us, head butting and purring the whole ride home. Max had volunteered to bathe her as soon as we walked in the door and I'd simply nodded and headed to my room.

Once submerged in the soapy water, I let everything I'd been holding back flow. I sobbed until I felt empty and then I told myself that I had to put it all behind me and move on. I was halfway through my lecture about what I needed to do to reclaim my life and how I needed to stand on my own two feet and not expect anyone to come and rescue me ever again when Max tapped on the door.

"Lexi? I've got a glass of wine and some food for you," he said. "May I bring it in?"

"Sure, come on in," I said after checking to make sure that I was fully covered by bubbles, then immediately felt foolish. Max had seen everything already; why was I hiding?

He entered carrying a small side table in one hand and a tray in the other. He set the table down next to the tub and then slid the tray on top of it before turning and heading back out the door. His hair was wet from a shower, and he was wearing only a loose pair of pajama bottoms and a tank top. He looked more handsome than I'd ever seen him, and my heart thumped in my chest before I remembered what I'd wanted to ask him the whole time I'd been held captive.

"Max?" I called softly. He turned with a questioning look on his face. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Dunno," he shrugged. "Embarrassed? Ashamed? Afraid that you'd judge me and assume that I was one of them?"

"How could you think that?" I asked. Again, he shrugged. I waited for a few moments and then quietly asked, "How did you know where to find me?"

"Dementyev made a second video after he taped you," he said as he leaned against the doorframe looking at me. "He demanded an exchange.

Vladimir for you."

"So, you brought him to the warehouse to make the exchange?"

"I didn't want to do it that way," he said. "I wanted to go in guns blazing and kill him, but my father said that's not the way things are done. He made me adhere to the *vory v zakone* rules and to have honor, even where there was none."

"How did your father know that Dementyev wasn't going to just kill us all?" I asked afraid of the answer.

"My father is a smart man – brutal, but smart," he replied. "He told me the plan and I trusted that he knew what he was doing. He'd been anticipating something like this for a very long time, so he'd put pieces in play that I had no idea about. Some of the men who were working for Dementyev were my father's men, they were the ones who made sure you had food and that Dementyev didn't do anything, um, really awful."

"He threatened to cut me open and watch my blood run into the drain," I whispered as I looked up at him and sank deeper into the water. Max nodded. I could see the anguish in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Lexi," he said in a voice full of pain. "I didn't know... I didn't think..."

"Max, I don't hold you responsible for mad man's actions," I told him. "He's a sick, twisted man who had a vendetta against your father. He was

going to hurt anyone who got in the way, right?"

"He did," he said. "He killed my brother."

"Oh, Max!" I cried as I quickly stood up and grabbed a towel. He looked away as I wrapped the cloth around me and moved in front of him, where I laid a hand on his cheek and said, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault, Max."

"I could have prevented it," he said, choking back a sob. "I could have saved him if I'd just been there."

"Max, if you'd been there, then you'd both be dead." I held his face with both hands and forced him to look up at me.

"But I didn't protect you," he whispered. "I tried, but I failed."

"Max, listen to me," I said as I looked up into his beautiful, blue eyes. "You did everything in your power to protect me. I fired the security guard because I was angry at you for not telling me about your background. I don't think you could have done more than what you did."

"It wasn't good enough," he winced. "How will you ever be able to trust me again?"

"Max?" I stepped closer and rose up on my tiptoes so that I was only inches from his face. I smiled as I said, "I'll trust you because...because... because I love you, and that's all there is to it."

His ice blue eyes went from hard to soft in an instant, and he looked at me utterly surprised as he blurted out, "What did you just say?"

"I said, I love you, Max Malin – Malinchenko," I said in a clear voice as I quickly kissed his lips. "And, there isn't anything in the world you can do to stop me."

"Lexi." He shook his head, but I stopped him as I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him again. In instant, his arms were around me as he lifted me up off of the floor and held me tightly against his chest. His smile told me everything I needed to know, but when he spoke, my heart soared. "Lexi, I love you, too. I've loved you from the moment I met you. I was so afraid that Dementyev had hurt you."

"I know, but he didn't." I looked directly into his eyes.

"You can thank your kitten for the showing me where you were," he said as a still damp Anna squeezed between us and head butted our legs, demanding attention. "She was one determined little girl."

"I know, she hopped up on the windowsill after you'd disappeared and gave me hope," I told him as I looked down at the tiny kitten that was now delicately licking her fur. Max bowed his head and pressed his cheek against my shoulder.

"I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you," he whispered. "I don't think I could have handled it."

"Max, I'm here now," I said as I cradled his head in my hands and kissed his hair. "I'm okay."

He lifted his face and looked at me before slowly lowering me to the floor. My arms were still around his neck as he gently cupped my face and bent to kiss me. The touch of his lips sent sparks shooting through my body and reminded me of all the ways in which I wanted him. His lips were soft, but insistent as he slowly began running his hands down my sides. He scooped me up and carried me to the bed, his lips never leaving mine.

Max gently set me on the bed before he peeled away the towel. I blushed as his eyes traveled across my body, taking in every inch before he looked into my eyes and smiled.

"You're so beautiful," he told me as he traced a path from my lips down to my breasts, where he slowly circled one of my nipples as he leaned down and kissed me again. He sat up and then pulled off the tank top he was wearing before sinking down on the bed next to me. He propped himself up on his elbow as he used his free hand to slowly explore my naked body.

"Max..." I said as I stroked his cheek. His response was to lean down and capture one of my nipples between his teeth and lightly nip at it. I moaned as other hand slipped between my thighs and cupped the warmth that radiated from between them. He took his time as he teased one nipple and then the other before returning to my lips and kissing me deeply. I slid

my hands down the length of his long, lean body, stroking his skin as I kissed him back.

I could feel his hardness pressing against my thigh as I arched my back, pressing my bare skin against him. He murmured something I couldn't quite understand and then kissed me harder as I tugged on the waistband of his pants. He quickly withdrew his hand from its warm place between my thighs and shed his bottom layer before lowering himself down on top of me. He pushed up with one hand and gently nudged my thighs apart with his knee before lowering himself again.

I could feel his shaft resting between my slick, swollen lips as he slid up and down, coating himself in my wetness. I moaned more insistently as I spread my legs wider and reached down to guide him to the edge of my needy opening. He smiled as he hovered over me, teasing me as he slipped the tip in and then withdrew it over and over.

"Max, Max! Oh, please! Please!" I begged as I looked up at him with wild eyes. He bent down and slowly kissed me as he finally slid his entire length deep inside of me. The sensation was overwhelming and I gasped as I felt him filling me so completely. A long, low moan escaped from my lips as he buried himself in me and held completely still as he slid one hand between our bodies and began lightly stroking my clit. The delicious agony drove me to the edge of desire before I knew it.

"Max, please, please. I need it!" I cried as I felt him slowly moving his fingers over my swollen bud. He smiled, but continued playing as though he hadn't heard me. My pulse raced, and I felt the blood flowing through my veins, making my skin more sensitive and aware of his touch. Max played my body like his own personal instrument, slowly and deliberately with great care and attention to every detail. I'd never surrendered myself to anyone like this and when I finally gave in and submitted, he began moving his hips ever so slowly.

The rhythm was excruciatingly slow and I could feel him stroking my inner walls as he pulled back until just the tip of his shaft remained inside me. And, with one quick thrust of his hips, he quickly buried himself deep inside me again. I cried out as he did it again and again, feeling his length and thickness dragging across the sensitive nerve endings deep inside my body. I could feel myself becoming more and more aroused as he maintained his slow pull back and quick thrust in. I was wet and wanting, and I begged him to go faster and deeper.

"I love watching you when you're aroused," he whispered into my lips. "There's nothing sexier than your desire."

"Max, please," I said in a ragged voice.

"Please what?" He grinned as he continued his movements. I moaned when he held still for a moment. "Tell me, Lexi, please what?"

"Max," I looked into his eyes, allowing him to see the bare need in my own as I replied, "Take me, now..."

He paused for a moment, nodded, and then pushed himself up so that he was, again, positioned just at the edge. He kissed me deeply as he thrust into me fast and hard. I groaned into his lips as I felt him quickly push in and then withdraw. I braced my feet against the mattress and lifted my hips to meet his thrusts and drive him deeper and deeper.

Soon, we were both moaning as our hips moved together in a rhythm that pounded out our insatiable desire. I could feel the sweat dripping off his skin and splashing onto mine as we raced toward our climax.

"Do it, Lexi, do it," he said as he felt me begin to tighten around him. "Take it, I want to feel you let go and fly. Come for me, baby!"

His words set off the chain reaction and I let go. I could feel the wave moving through me as it spread out from my core and reached every nerve ending in my body. I screamed as the orgasm cascaded from inside to outside and I gripped Max's arms and slammed my hips up against his to try and force him all the way inside of me. I could feel my inner muscles contracting around him hard and strong as he continued his driving rhythm until he, too, pushed the limit and released. Max's groan came from somewhere deep inside of him as he thrust into to me one last time and then

lay there throbbing while I pulsed around him, milking his shaft and drawing out everything he had to offer.

When we'd both reached the other side, he slowly withdrew and collapsed beside me, wrapping his arms around my now cold body. He drew up the covers and pulled me tightly to his chest as he kissed my head and whispered, "I love you, Lexi Wallace. God, how I love you."

"I love you, too," I whispered as I tipped my head up to kiss him. "More than you know."

Then, with limbs entwined, we fell into a deep, deep sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Max

It was dark when I woke up, and I had no idea whether it was morning or night. I looked down at Lexi sleeping soundly next to me. She looked angelic with her hair spread out across the pillow, and when I leaned down and kissed her forehead, she stirred slightly and a small smile spread across her lips. When I thought about how close I'd come to losing her, felt a lump form in my throat and I swallowed hard to push it back down.

I got up and padded into the living room, followed closely by Anna, who was now dry and looking more like herself. I looked down at her and smiled. "What do you say, little girl; want to help me with something really important?" Anna chirped and head butted my ankles as she paced impatiently. I laughed out loud as I leaned down and patted her head and said, "Yes, of course, you can have dinner – or is it breakfast – first!"

I walked out to the kitchen, mixed up a bowl of Anna's favorite tuna and shrimp, and placed it on the mat in front of her. "You're a good girl, Anna," I said as I scratched her head. "A very good girl." She purred as she dug into the food, but she didn't lift her head.

I took a look at the clock on the microwave and realized it was very early morning. The sun would be rising in a short while, so I brewed myself a cup of strong coffee and took it out to the balcony to watch the sun rise over the lake while I planned my day.

I stood and watched as the sun began to peek out above the water. The effect was breathtaking as it slowly made its way into the sky, shining a glowing pink light across the lake that was then reflected out across the shore. As the sun rose higher, the light became brighter and the water began to sparkle as if covered in thousands of small diamonds and spreading out in prisms that danced on the surface. I watched as the sun quickly rose and became a bright ball of light illuminating everything it touched, and I knew exactly what I needed to do.

I quickly called a few of my favorite salespeople at a couple of stores, and despite the early hour, they jumped at the chance to help me get things moving. Then, I called the harbor and found a luxury yacht that could handle a special trip out on the lake. I'd always wanted to own a boat, but it was one of those things that screamed conspicuous wealth, and after Papa's

admonishments, I hadn't bought one – but today was different. Today was a new start and a chance to do the things I'd always wanted to do, but never dared.

I knew exactly how I wanted to spend the day, and it wasn't at the store. However, I did have some business to take care of, so I plotted my schedule knowing that I had a few important errands to run before I swung back around and picked Lexi up. I went back to the kitchen and quickly wrote her a note before heading to my room to shower and change. Once dressed, I called my driver and told him my plan as he pulled the car around to the front of the building.

I stepped into the elevator determined to ensure that everything would come out exactly as planned, but first, I had to see Papa.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Lexi

It was light outside when I finally emerged from the deep sleep that had pulled me under after Max and I had satisfied each other's needs. I smiled as I stretched my arm out towards the other side of the bed and was surprised to find it empty.

"Max?" I called as I sat up and looked around the room. "Max, are you out there?"

When I got no response, I flipped off the covers and hopped out of bed. I wrapped myself in a robe and padded out to the kitchen, where I found the coffee pot ready to brew and a note from Max on the counter beside it.

Good morning, beautiful! I'm sorry I'm not here to brew this myself, but I have some business to take care of this morning. The store is closed, so don't go in. I'll be back early this afternoon to take you to lunch, so put on

your prettiest dress – or pick one from the assortment that will arrive around 11 a.m. Enjoy your morning, and I'll see you for lunch. Love, Max

I laughed out loud at the thought of Max Malin – Malinchenko – writing a love note to me, but the image was so endearing that I picked up the piece of paper and held it to my lips as I flipped the switch and listened to the water heating up as the strong scent of coffee began to fill the kitchen.

I didn't even try to figure out what he had planned. I just accepted that my job was to be ready when he returned. It was ten in the morning and the dresses would be arriving in an hour, so I decided to drink my coffee as I got ready. As I stood watching the brewing coffee, I lost myself in the memory of the night before and shivered as I recalled the way that Max had drawn out every delicious sensation and made my body sing in his hands. I wanted more of that. And much more.

Lost in my reverie, I didn't hear the elevator bell ring the first time, so when a familiar voice called out, "Lexi? Where are you, girl?" I jumped.

"Viv?" I called as I rounded the corner and saw my best friend standing in the living room weighted down by garment bags and a huge duffel.

"What are you doing here?"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing here?" she shouted as she dropped everything on the floor and rushed to embrace me. "My best friend

gets kidnapped by a murderous Russian madman and you're asking what the hell I'm doing here?"

"It was awful, Viv," I whispered as I held tightly to my best friend.

"I know, Max told me," she said as she patted my head and gripped my arms. "I was afraid I'd lost you."

"I'm okay," I sighed as I rested my head on her shoulder and let the tears flow. "I've never been so scared in my entire life."

"You want to talk about it?" she asked quietly.

"No, I don't ever want to talk about that lunatic again," I said in a fierce voice. "I want to forget that it ever happened and move on."

"It's okay, Wally," she whispered. "It's okay, nothing bad will ever happen again. Anna has proved that she'll never let anything bad happen to you ever."

"Don't say that," I warned. "She did her best and never left me, but you can't promise that."

"Sure I can," she said confidently as she pushed me back and looked me in the eyes. "I can say that because I have over fifty-thousand dollars worth of merchandise in these bags and nothing bad can happen when you are dressed in an Alexander McQueen or Betsey Johnson gown. Promise."

"Viv, what the heck are you talking about?" I laughed through tears. "Are you insane?"

"Nope, not any more than I usually am," she crowed as she walked over to the pile of dresses that she'd dumped on the floor. "I'm saying that we need to get you ready for lunch with Max this afternoon, so let's take a look at the gems that these ladies put together and see which one you like best!"

"Are you going to tell me what's going on here?" I asked wiping my eyes.

"I've already told you," she insisted. "Now, let's play fashion model with you as the model!"

For the next hour, she had me try on every dress she'd brought with the shoes that she'd gathered from all of the boutiques around town. There were necklaces, scarves, clutch purses, and pashmina wraps to accompany each of the dresses, and after a while, I began to feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices. I looked helplessly at Viv and threw up my hands.

"You decide!" I declared. "I'm tired of trying things on! Each one looks better than the one before it!"

"I know, right?" she said as she bounced up and down on one of the chairs in the living room. "This is the best fashion show ever!"

"I'm serious, Viv," I said, collapsing into a heap on the sofa in a gorgeous metallic lace midi dress that had a blue under layer and a Bardot neckline. I was wearing a gorgeous pair of impossibly high-heeled silver

sandals that matched the overlay on the dress. "I don't know what to choose."

"I think you should wear this one," she said holding up a simple teal blue wrap dress that had a subtle black geometric pattern running through the material. It was made of a light jersey fabric that clung to my body in all the right places and had a slit up the thigh that revealed just enough to skin to make it sexy without being tasteless. I nodded. "And, these shoes." She held up a pair of nude sandals that had thick straps across the toes and instep before attaching at the ankle with one more strap. They looked beautiful with the dress and fit perfectly.

I quickly showered and pulled my hair up into a loose chignon at the nape of my neck before Viv came into the bathroom and applied my makeup, all the while scolding Anna, who wound her body around Viv's feet as she danced and chirped. "Get out from under my feet, cat!" she laughingly scolded before bending down to scoop up the small kitten and kiss her head.

When she was finished, she stood back and surveyed her handiwork and pronounced me gorgeous. I donned the dress and sandals, and as I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I conceded that the overall effect was stunning and smiled as I thought about how Max would respond to all of this fussing and pampering. And yet, I felt like something was missing.

Suddenly, I realized what it was and I dashed into the bedroom and rooted around in the top drawer of my dresser for a long time before finally locating what I was looking for; it was the pendant that Max had given me the first day of work. I quickly attached the clasp and then stood back and nodded.

Viv let loose a low wolf whistle as I walked into the living room, then she made me walk the length of the room and turn and walk back. She nodded her approval and gave me a thumb's up just as the doorman rang to let me know that Mr. Malin was waiting downstairs for me.

When the elevator doors slid open, I turned and looked back at Viv. Her wide smile told me everything I needed to know, and I smiled back as the doors slid shut and the elevator carried me down to Max.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Max

I'd spent the morning calling to have everything set up for lunch, and then headed over to see Papa. I wasn't looking forward to the visit, but I knew that the longer I avoided him, the worse it would be when we finally talked. I also needed a favor – one that I wasn't sure he was going to grant, but I had to ask.

When I arrived at Ursus, Feliks warned me in a hushed whisper that Papa was in a bear of a mood, and that I might think about coming back later once he'd had a chance to calm down. I thought about it for a moment and then shook my head. I would take my chances.

"Maksimka," Papa said as he poured two shots and offered me one. Sitting and drinking with my father was the last thing I wanted to be doing,

but to refuse would have been an insult that would taint the rest of our conversation and I knew he was just trying to find common ground.

I accepted the shot and we quickly tossed them back before I said, "Papa, what happened?"

"Maksimka, I'm going to tell you this one time and one time only," he said in a weary voice as he rubbed his eyes with one hand. "There are some things that I did while in the KGB and afterwards that I am not proud of. They were things that I should probably spend time in jail for having done, but I did them for the sole purpose of protecting you, your brother, and your mother."

"Papa, I'm not here to condemn you," I said quietly. "I just want to know what happened and whether I need to be worried about you. Or me."

"You're a good boy," he said as he reached across the table and patted my hand. "You've always been a good boy. I never meant for any of this to ever touch you. Kristov knew what he was getting into and I gave him the option of walking away many years ago, but he wanted to be in the life. I swear on the grave of my father."

"Then, why did the two of you work so hard to try and blackmail me back into the fold?" I said through clenched teeth. I could feel my blood beginning to boil as I realized that everything they'd done had been a lie. In fact, I wondered if what Papa was telling me now was also a lie. "I didn't

want to be a part of it and you knew that, but you bullied me into coming back. You threatened me, Papa, or have you forgotten that."

"No, I have not," he said as he hung his head. "I will never forget that."

"Why did you do it?"

"There is no easy answer, Maksimka," he said, lifting his head and looking at me in a way that made me shudder. "I did it because I love you. Because I loved your mother and your brother. It was love."

"You have a very sick way of showing love, you know that, don't you?" I hissed. I could feel myself getting angrier and angrier at him as I listened to yet another useless excuse. He wasn't apologizing for his cruelty, he was explaining it away. He was rationalizing it as love, and I wasn't going to buy the lies. "You are a cruel man who has done cruel things to the people who loved him."

The pain in Papa's eyes almost convinced me to stop and drop to my knees to beg for forgiveness, but then the image of my brother lying in his bed with a hole in his forehead swam in front of me and I fought the urge. His death was my father's fault. No matter what he said, it was my father's fault. And, I was finally going to ask the one question I most wanted an answer to.

"Did you kill Mama?" I blurted out. Papa's face twisted into a mask of pain and rage as the words hung in the air between us. He raised his hand

and then dropped it into his lap.

"You have no idea how painful that question is," he said slowly. "But the truth is that I did not kill her, Maksim. She was collateral damage in a war that should never have been fought, but I did not kill your mother. I loved her more than I loved myself, and I would have died trying to protect her."

"Then, why didn't you?" came the anguished cry from my lips. "Why did you let my Mama die?"

"I will never be able to give you a satisfactory answer to that question, Maksimka," my father said as he dropped his head into his hands and shook silently. Even in grief, my father was a *bratán* who didn't let his emotions show. I watched him with tears in my eyes, but I didn't make a move to comfort him. To do that would be to break the code of the *vory v zakone*, and although I wasn't one of them, I did respect the fact that he was. After a few minutes, he regained enough control to say, "Someday, when you love someone that much, you'll understand."

"I do, Papa," I said. "I do love someone that much."

"Miss Wallace?"

"Yes," I replied. "I want to make a life with her. She matters more to me than anyone in the world."

"Then, you will need this," he said as he reached into his shirt and pulled out a long chain on which hung a thin band encircled with small diamonds. He undid the chain and pulled the ring off of it, offering it up to me. "It was your mother's wedding ring. I bought it for her when we lived in Moscow. I had to eat out of garbage cans for a month after buying it, but I wanted her to know she would always be taken care of if she agreed to marry me."

I took the ring and studied it. It was worn and scratched, but the etching on the inside was still readable. It said, *Lyublyu, chest' leleyat*. I read the words aloud, "Love, honor, cherish."

"I did, you know," he said quietly. "Despite what you think, I loved your mother more than anyone."

"I'm sure you did," I agreed, trying to find a way to meet him in the middle of our individual pain.

"Go find Miss Wallace and ask her to let you be the one to love her more than anyone," he said with a wry grin. "Women like that."

"Thank you, Papa," I said before I turned and headed out the door and back to Lexi.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Lexi

When I walked out the door of the building, the first thing I saw was Max standing next to the car, holding a huge bouquet of red roses. I gave him a confused look, but then quickly smiled as he explained, "I know it's cliché, but I have always wanted to walk into a flower shop and say 'Give me all the red roses you have!'" I laughed loudly at his silly explanation and then stood on my tiptoes to kiss his lips.

"Why do you always pull your hair back?" he asked as he slipped his hand to the nape of my neck as he gently kissed me before tugging on the pins that held my hair. "I like it down!"

"Well, fine then," I laughed. "I was trying to be professional!"

"Why on earth would you want to be professional on a day like this?" he asked as he ushered me into the waiting car and we were whisked off to

the harbor. When we arrived, he popped out of his side and came around to mine, opening the door for me with a small flourish.

"Max, what are we doing?" I laughed as he offered his hand and helped me out of the car.

"We're going to do things that I've never done before today," he smiled. "Today is going to be a day full of firsts."

"I find it very hard to believe that you've never been on a boat before," I said warily.

"Oh, I've been on plenty of boats," he agreed. "I've just never owned one before."

"What?" I exclaimed as he took my hand and pulled me down the dock toward a large white vessel docked at the end of the row. "What did you do, Max?"

"I bought a boat!" he said with no small amount of glee. "It's mine!"

"Did you hit your head?" I asked, partly serious.

"I did not," he laughed. "I have spent my life doing everything that was expected of me and never breaking any rules, until I met you. And now, I feel like I want to do things that don't conform."

"Oh, Max!" I cried as we walked toward the boat and I saw that he'd had the bow painted with the name "Anna."

"I thought it was fitting since she's the reason we're both here," he smiled. He helped me up onto the gangplank and held my arm as we walked across the swaying connection from the land to the water. He introduced me to the captain who would be navigating our trip around Lake Michigan and then gave me a quick tour of the boat. It was a grand extravagance, and I had to keep reminding myself that Max was more than able to afford these kinds of toys. We ended the tour back up on deck where a table had been set; as the captain steered us away from the harbor toward the deeper waters of the lake, we were served a lunch like I'd never eaten before in my life.

There were oysters on the half shell swimming in lemon and parsley, a fresh, crisp salad made of the most tender greens and lightly coated in a raspberry vinaigrette dressing that made me want to sing, and the main course was poached salmon with lemon dill fingerling potatoes and fresh, steamed green beans tossed in garlic butter and topped with toasted almonds. Every bite was more delicious than the last and we marveled at the talent of the chef with every offering as we sipped the cold, crisp white wine that the server poured.

When we were finally stuffed to the gills, Max stood up and walked to the back railing and watched the water spread out in rippled waves behind us as we sped across the lake. He held out his hand to me and I joined him. He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me against his chest as he

looked into my eyes. I shivered as I held his icy blue gaze, knowing the heat and passion that lay on the other side. I could feel his desire swelling as it pressed against my stomach and I felt my own warmth begin to spread.

"Lexi, I don't know what I'd do without you," he said as he raised a hand to my face and gently stroked my cheek. "You have changed my world. You've expanded it and made it bigger and brighter, and you've made me realize that there's nothing more important in life than love. I love you, Lexi Wallace."

"I love you, too, Max Malin...Malinchenko." I gazed up into his face and decided that there was nothing I loved more than staring at it.

"I don't ever want to be without you again," he said as he let go of my waist and lightly kissed my lips. The next thing I knew, he had dropped to one knee and was holding up a small black box as he said, "Will you do me the great honor of agreeing to marry me, Lexi Wallace?"

"What?" I replied, shocked and not sure if I had suddenly hallucinated this whole scene.

"Will you marry me?" he repeated as he opened the box and offered me the most exquisite ring I'd ever seen in my life. I looked at the ring and then back at him, scared that it was all going to disappear.

"Yes, Max, I will marry you!" I cried as he stood up and took the ring out of the box, placing it on my finger and kissing me deeply. I wrapped my

arms around my neck and returned his kiss before throwing my head back and laughing. "I love you, Max Malinchenko!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Epilogue

I watched Viv step out into the aisle as the music began to play, then I took a deep breath, centered the bouquet of perfect red roses, and began my walk toward Max. He was standing at the end of the aisle with a wide smile on his face, waiting for me to join him. The venue was packed with hundreds of people who wanted to wish us well, but I only had eyes for Max.

After he'd proposed, we'd spent the next several weeks turning our fake publicity stunt into a real wedding, figuring that it was better to do it now rather than later. I'd given up working in the store for rehearsals with the theater company and they'd agreed to give me a few days off to get married, despite the fact that we were under a great deal of pressure to get the show up and running. Max had offered to underwrite the show so that they

wouldn't have to worry about the expenses, but I'd quickly put the kibosh on that, knowing that he would understand how hard I'd worked for this.

We had agreed that we'd take a long honeymoon as soon as the three-month run of the play was done, but we hadn't decided where to go. The night that Max took me to meet his Babi and his father, Max's father revealed that he had arranged for us to tour Moscow and St. Petersburg, before heading to the Ukraine to see the wonders of Kiev. I could tell that Max was angry, but I could also see that his father was trying to offer him an olive branch, so I declared it was the best trip anyone could have given us and Max softened.

At the end of the evening, as we were preparing to leave, Babi pulled me aside and hugged me tightly saying, "You are just what we need in this family. *Ty nasha radast.*"

"And I need a family, so it looks like we're a good fit," I smiled as I hugged her back.

Looking around, I saw Babi's smiling face and Vladimir standing next to her, smiling proudly. My own parents had not been able to make it back to the States in time for the wedding, but they had promised to be home in time to celebrate Christmas with us at the penthouse. As I looked up at the front of the aisle, I saw Viv facing me and her smile lit up the room as she held tightly to a small, gray kitten that looked only mildly irritated about

having to play the role of bridesmaid bouquet. Viv planted a kiss on Anna's head and the little fur-ball chirped as I came into view.

I smiled and focused my attention on Max as I reached his side. He held out his hand and as I took it, I knew I'd found my forever home in his smile.

#

After the ceremony, Lexi and I spent the evening dining, drinking, and dancing with our guests. There was an outpouring of love and gifts, and by the time the night was over, Lexi and I had kissed and hugged hundreds of people, some of whom we didn't know at all, but who were close friends of Sergei Petrov and his investment partners. Petrov told me that he had a new deal he'd like to share with me, and I agreed to meet him for lunch the following week to discuss it.

Out on the dance floor, I held Lexi close and swayed to the music as I counted the minutes until we could escape back to the privacy of our home. "I want to take you home now," I whispered in her ear as I let my hand roam a little farther than was entirely appropriate.

"Mr. Malinchenko, please, we have guests," she giggled as she wrapped her arm around my waist and pulled me tightly against her, daring me to protest.

"Mrs. Malinchenko, please, you are being highly inappropriate!" I protested.

As Lexi threw her head back and laughed loudly, I leaned down and kissed her neck. The scent of her was intoxicating, and I felt my body responding to her warmth as I kissed a path up her neck to her lips, where I received a low moan as a reward for my efforts at seduction.

"When can we leave?" I asked very seriously.

"Soon," she replied as she looked up into my eyes and smiled.

We exited through the crowd as they tossed rice and rose petals at us, wishing us well. I grabbed Lexi's hand and we made a run for the car waiting out front, and once inside, I put my arms around her and kissed her deeply, tasting the wine and sweet sugar frosting from our cake on her lips. By the time we arrived home, we were both vibrating with desire, so I scooped her up in my arms and made a mad dash for the elevator, much to the surprise of the doorman.

Up in the penthouse, I carried Lexi to the master bedroom and gently set her down on the bed before stepping back so I could take one more look at her. I dropped to my knees in front of her and pulled her hands to my lips as I whispered, "You are the most beautiful woman in the world, Lexi Malinchenko, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to prove myself worthy of your love."

"Oh, Max," she sighed as she pulled me to her and placed her hands on either side of my face. "I love you more than you will ever know."

I gently kissed her lips as I unzipped her dress and slowly pushed it off of her shoulders, exposing her bare skin. I heard her sigh as I ran the tips of my fingers over her shoulders and down her chest. As I slipped her dress off and left it puddled on the ground in a pool of white satin and shining beads, I laid her down before quickly shedding my own clothing.

I had been aching for her for hours, and I knew she had been doing the same when I slid a hand between her thighs and felt the fierce heat radiating from between her legs. I pushed myself up so that I was positioned above her as she pressed her lips to mine and moaned loudly. With one quick thrust, I was deep inside her and I heard her cry out as she raked her nails down my sides and arched her back to meet my pounding rhythm. I could hear her begging me to take her to make her mine, so I lost myself in the rhythm as I steadily pulled back and then thrust into her again and again.

It didn't take either of us long to reach the peak, and as soon as I slid a hand between us and began firmly stroking her clit, I heard her cry out and felt the familiar clenching and release as she climaxed. Moments later, I joined her as I let go and released all the desire and tension I'd been holding in all day. I groaned loudly and felt her hands on my face as I looked down into her beautiful eyes and smiled.

“Don’t ever *stoya*, Mr. Malinchenko,” she smiled up at me.

“Never,” I promised. “Not ever.”

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