



A Man of Wealth

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Description: Billionaire Conner Sterling despises one woman, but he's about to need her help. Conner Sterling is arrogant and brilliant. He runs this city, manipulating every politician like a marionette. His past has made him distrust everyone but his closest friends, the ones who share his darkest secret. And the person he finds the most deceitful is about to offer him a deal he can't pass up. The granddaughter of a former president, Vivienne Westwood, may have used her connections to start her journalism career, but she's determined to make a name for herself. The only thing standing in her way is the pretentious bad boy of the city. When these two enemies are forced to work together, they find themselves drawn into an elaborate dark criminal world existing just below the city's surface. Can they hunt down the person responsible without hurting each other in the process? (less)

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Chapter1

Conner

My father is a kidnapper? Her words echo in my head. My father. The more I consider it, the more it becomes a very tangible truth.

“Are you sure?” Sebastian asks. “You didn’t say anything about an accent when you told me.”

Alexis looks from me to Sebastian and back again. “You’re British?” she asks, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

I shake my head. “My father is.”

She turns her attention to Sebastian. “I don’t know why I didn’t think about the man having an accent. I’m still a little foggy about the memory, but that voice...I’ll never forget that voice.”

She has a valid point. My father’s voice is quite distinctive. With his slightly faded British accent and his deep baritone sound, it’s hard to forget it.

I look to Sebastian for guidance. I have no idea what he’s told her.

Sebastian takes Alexis by the hand and leads her to a seat at the kitchen island. She slowly sits and stares up at him.

“There are a lot of things that you don’t know, Alexis.” He looks at me and I give him a subtle shake of the head. He can’t tell her.

“Such as?” she asks, her words slow and confused.

“Confervo may be worse than we thought. There are some very powerful people in this city, who do some very shady things. We may have stirred the pot with our research.” Sebastian sighs and I can tell he doesn’t want to have this conversation with me present, but it’s better I’m here to know what he says. “That’s why I tried to break things off between us. I didn’t want you involved in something that could potentially be dangerous, but now...it seems I’ve just put you right in the middle of it.”

Alexis frowns and looks over at me. “But...why would Conner’s dad be involved?”

I know why, but I’m letting Sebastian tell her. If he wants this woman, then he needs to be the one to speak the truth, or at least as much as we can divulge.

“Think this through. What does Conner do?” he prompts.

She gives him a pointed look, and I press my lips together to keep from laughing. I like this woman. “He runs a lobbying firm for the shipping industry.”

“And how did he come to do that?” Sebastian asks.

Her mouth opens and then closes and then opens again as she looks over at me. “Your father owns a shipping company,” she says. Her eyes widen as the puzzle pieces come together for her.

Sebastian glances at me. We will most definitely need to discuss this later.

“Seriously? I was drugged and hit over the head; I’m not stupid. What the hell is going on? Is your father shipping these drugs into the country?” Alexis says as she pushes back her seat and stands abruptly. She sways a little and Sebastian lunges forward to catch her.

“Whoa, little dove. You need to rest.”

She presses a hand to his chest as she steadies herself. “I’m fine. I’m just a little woozy from the concussion.”

I watch Sebastian as he keeps his hands firmly planted on her hips. Damn, Mr. Perfect has it bad for his little lady. There’s something serious between them. I can’t understand that part of it. I will never have that with a woman, never. I don’t do serious relationships. In my world, serious relationships equal collateral damage.

“He may be. Alexis, are you absolutely sure?” I say, drawing her attention away from Sebastian. She looks over her shoulder at me.

I play the voice message again and she closes her eyes as she listens. When it ends, she nods slowly. Her large eyes open, and she stares at me. “Yes. The way he said...fucking. He says it strangely like he has an accent, but not really. It’s...unique.”

She’s not wrong. It is unique. There are a handful of words that are like this when he speaks. I look at Sebastian again.

“I need to go. Get her to bed. I’ll be in touch,” I state as I stand and walk toward his front door. I turn before I open the door. “By the way, Bryce Gallagher called me today. All our security systems have been hacked. He thinks that whoever hacked them is probably the same person who broke into your office. His team will be out tomorrow to fix it permanently, but they...overrode the hack for the time being.”

“Jesus, maybe you could have mentioned that at the beginning of our conversation,” Sebastian growls.

I open the door and head back to my house. I don’t mention that Bryce thinks we’ve all been being watched for some time now. Because we both know that we’ve been watched. We’ve been watched since the day we took the vow.

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I make it inside my door when my phone pings. I look down. Aiden has texted me a news article by none other than the lovely Vivienne Westerly.

I glance at it as I walk over to my bar. Her photo pops up alongside it. Why does she have to be so fucking beautiful? This calls for my best bourbon. Pouring myself two fingers, I take a sip and sit down on my sectional, letting my long legs stretch across the leather. I skim through the latest article as I let the amber liquid burn with each swallow.

Vivienne is on the hunt, as usual. I don't exactly know why she's chosen the brotherhood as her target. She clearly has no idea we even exist, but it's only a matter of time before she puts two and two together. I just hope it'll give us enough time to implode this house of cards from the inside. She's a nosy bitch who needs to stay the fuck out of things she knows nothing about.

I hate the media. I've hated the media ever since my mother's death. They painted her as a whore and a gold digger. She wasn't any of those things.

I toss my phone on the coffee table and lean back as I take another sip. My mother. I can still remember the smell of her perfume. The feel of her smooth lips against my forehead as she kissed me goodnight for the very last time.

I can still hear the explosion, see the fire. Hear the screams.

I down the rest of my drink, trying to wash away the horrid memories. I open my eyes and look around the room. The cathedral ceiling has a dozen skylights, allowing me to view the stars overhead. I've purposefully left the lights off. Only the dim

under-cabinet lights in the kitchen illuminate the house. I like it dark in here.

My granny was blind by the time I was born. A product of another accident. She never used her lights, and after spending several summers with her, against my father's wishes, I became accustomed to the dark. She taught me how to use my hearing to compensate for my sight. She taught me many things, but that lesson has stuck with me, even now.

My mind wanders back to Alexis. Her words were shocking, yet not. Sebastian once alluded to the fact that he all but knew his father was part of the elite. I've long suspected the same thing about my own father. They run in very different circles, yet their business relationships seem anything but mutually exclusive. Sebastian's father is two years older than mine, but they were at school together and they were brothers in the fraternity. We didn't know this until we pledged and took the vow. The vow that changed everything.

It was during pledging that Sebastian and I met. We quickly learned, along with Aiden, that all three of us were legacies. In fact, our pledge class had a few other legacies, and all of us became part of the brotherhood. It wasn't until the secret ceremony that we learned why. The brotherhood always has reasons for who becomes a member.

I set my glass in the sink, knowing that Felicia will take care of it tomorrow. She's been with me since I bought this place. She comes in daily and takes care of my home and personal life. She's like a big sister to me, which is maybe something I needed. Aiden and Sebastian have siblings, or Sebastian did. I'm the lone wolf of our trifecta. I prefer it that way. If you keep to yourself, people can't hurt you.

I look down at my phone. I need to call my father. I need to find out his involvement, but he can't know what I've found out. I play out different scenarios in my head before finally settling on the one that I'll use.

Pressing the call button, I put it on speaker. It rings four times.

“Hello, Conner,” Lena’s voice answers. Fucking Lena. Lena Harkins is my father’s assistant, if that’s what you want to call it. They are one hundred percent fucking. Lena is in it for the lifestyle and money. So, she doesn’t give a shit that Theodore can’t seem to keep it in his pants as long as he brings her diamond tennis bracelets every time she finds out about his indiscretions. It’s fucked up in only a way that my father could fuck it up.

“Hello, Lena. Is my father there?”

“He’s indisposed at the moment. Can I take a message?” Indisposed. That’s rich. Indisposed means he’s either getting a blowjob, which is unlikely since she answered his phone, or he’s busy entertaining clients, more likely since I can hear voices in the background.

“I have some business matters to discuss with him when he has a moment.”

“Of course. I’ll have him call you when he can.”

When he can? This entire conversation should make me want to stab people, yet it’s par for the course. This is how we operate in my so-called family.

“Thank you,” I reply through gritted teeth as I hang up and stare out at the backyard which is dark except for the lights in the pool.

When Sebastian started down this whole “research a pharmaceutical company” thing, I in no way thought it would lead down this rabbit hole. I fear the Pandora’s box he’s opened is way bigger than he ever imagined. We’re going to have to figure out how this drug is getting into the U.S. so we can stop its use; and if we are going to take down the brotherhood or even part of it, then we’ll need to identify every member of

the elite. It's going to be a near-impossible task since the elite members aren't known, but the one thing I know about Sebastian North is that man will stop at nothing once he's made up his mind. He and Aiden are the closest thing I have to a real family, so if he's going down trying to fix this mess, then I guess I'm the co-captain of his doomed ship.

I turn and head to my bedroom as I begin to lay out my plan. The first person going down...will be my father.

Chapter2

Vivienne

I need two things, more wine and to get laid. Glancing at my laptop, I reach for the glass of chardonnay that I know is sitting to my right because Marvin, the bartender, put it there. I find it and bring it to my lips, letting the cool liquid fill my mouth. He gave me the good stuff. Fucking Marvin, he wants a good tip tonight. I look up, expecting to find him watching me and waiting for some smartass comment, but I'm wrong, very wrong.

Marvin is in fact down at the other end of the bar serving, I squint to see better, Senator Cumberland. It takes a great deal of fortitude to not roll my eyes because next to him is his staffer, Clarice, who he is fucking. Everyone knows this. Even his pearl-clutching, could-freeze-fire-with-a-look wife knows it. Marvin is getting me intel. A small smirk forms on my face. That bastard will be getting a good tip after all.

My stare travels from the far end of the bar to a movement on my right. Bingo!

Conner Sterling has arrived. I had heard a little while ago that he might stop in here. He was spotted in the city this evening and this bar is one of his favorite spots. He looks to be in a mood. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him up close yet. One

thing is for sure, those photographs that I've seen do not do this man justice.

Everything about him is large. He looks foreboding as his giant frame approaches the bar. The only seat available is the one next to me. I've arranged it this way, hoping that he'd be here tonight. Lady luck is clearly on my side this evening.

As though Marvin senses the power and wealth radiating off the man next to me, he immediately excuses himself and in five long strides is in front of us.

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“Mr. Sterling, how are you this evening? The usual?” he asks as he reaches for a tumbler from the shelf of glasses next to him.

Conner eyes the top-shelf alcohol and nods. “Yes, Marvin. Three fingers tonight.”

“Coming right up, sir.” Marvin goes to work, pulling down the most expensive bottle of whiskey on the shelf. I watch him pour it and place it in front of Conner. “Anything else that I can get you?”

Conner shakes his head, and as though sensing his mood, Marvin quickly moves away. He does cast me a quick glance out of the corner of his eyes. I nod to him, letting him know that I will chat with him later. He returns my acknowledgment with a nod of his own before going to wait on a few staffers from Senator Herringbone’s office.

I weigh my next move. Do I let him drink first? Should I speak now? I’ve been observing him for weeks, but suddenly I’m nervous, and I’m never nervous. I watch as he brings the tumbler up to his lips and takes a long sip. A tattoo peeks out from under his cuff. In this city, it speaks volumes. He’s no pretty boy. No polished leader of the flock. No, not Conner Sterling.

“You going to stare at me all night, or will you be grilling me while I try to unwind?” he mutters as he sets the glass back on the bar.

I attempt to remain unaffected by this abrupt change of my plans. “Rough day?” I retort.

His head slowly turns, and those dark blue eyes pierce me. He looks as dangerous as his father, but with a charm the older man never had. I see one of his suits behind us. He's trying to blend in at a bar high-top table, only the man is even larger than Conner and couldn't blend into a room of giants either. I've noticed that sometimes Conner has security and sometimes he doesn't, but as of late, I see someone with him more and more. It has my curiosity piqued and I want to know why. What is going on with Conner? There's something brewing in the nation's capital, and I feel like Conner Sterling is most definitely involved.

My attention focuses back on Conner who is studying me coolly.

His eyes move from my face to my cream off-the-shoulder sweater, to the expensive trousers that hug my hips, and finally, my Louis Vuittons that grace my feet, which are currently propped on the brass footrest along the bottom of the bar. When his gaze meets mine again, I let out a breath. I should not be turned on by him. The smell of his woodsy cologne should not affect me. The way the fabric pulls around his bicep should not have me swallowing with desire. Fuck. Am I in over my head?

His eyes focus on mine for the longest moment as a frown threatens to form on his lips. Then, he looks past me at my laptop screen, and his lips thin into a line.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he grumbles as he turns back away from me and downs his drink in one large gulp. I find myself watching his Adam's apple bob as he swallows the amber liquid.

And then he stands and nods at Marvin while throwing down a hundred-dollar bill and walks out of the bar, leaving me sitting there, watching his fine ass as it exits through the door in which it just came from a few minutes earlier. The giant of a man I had clocked as his security follows him.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath.

Marvin comes up to me and gives me a long hard stare. “Viv, you ought to be more careful. That man was not in a mood to talk to anyone, especially you. Bud can only handle so much,” he states, as he motions to his security man sitting by the door.

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’m out of here. I need to come up with a new plan.”

I’ve made friends with several staff members at prominent bars and restaurants and even hotels in the city. Marvin is my favorite. He works at this bar at night and also picks up a few day shifts waiting at the only hotel that doesn’t need a name associated with it in this city. Whenever I need to know something about someone in what some view as the most powerful city in the world, Marvin is one of the first sources I go to.

I close my laptop and stick it in my bag. “I’m off,” I state as I down the last few drops of my drink and toss a fifty on the bar.

“Thanks, Viv,” he says as he pockets the money.

“Always a pleasure,” I reply as I head home to rethink my plan.

Home. It’s exactly three blocks away. I live in the middle of college students, literally. My neighbors are all college students, well, except for Florence, who is eighty-three and I think moved in when the building was completed. And this building is not new. It’s so old that it’s actually back in style now.

I open my door with a shove because the steel frame is bent and catches every time I shut it. I look around and sigh. I need to do dishes and laundry. I dread laundry day. The laundry room might as well be a haunted house complete with spiders. Maybe Jeff is right? My brother has tried to get me to fall in line for a long time. He gleefully plays family mediator on the daily, well, now it’s more like the monthly because I ignore all my family’s calls, and slowly they have begun to stop trying, except for my father who showed me his true colors years ago. I will never be one of them. I never

want to be one of them.

My phone pings with a text. My editor, Jane Armstrong.

Jane: How's the article coming along? Will you have anything for me this week?

I groan. I've been going down a rabbit hole ever since overhearing Sebastian North mention something to his chief of staff. They didn't know I was there. I was in fact hiding around a corner waiting to see if another congressman, who's been avoiding me for weeks, might come by when Congressman North happened to walk to the elevator. He mentioned to Harriet that his girlfriend had traces of some chemicals in her system, and he was having a friend check out if they were similar to some other women who have been found dead in the park recently. This immediately piqued my interest. While I'm not a crime investigator, those dead-girl cases have everyone talking, and if I could get the scoop on something, that could be big, like career-changing big.

Me: I'm working on it. I need to get some more interviews. Probably not this week.

Jane: I can't give you more time on this. Three weeks, that's it.

Me: Understood.

Maybe I should try to pump information out of Aiden Thomas? He's probably going to be an easier target than Conner Sterling, but I've long been trying to figure out the criminal connections of Sterling's father's company. Theodore Sterling is a brute amongst men, and the fact that he's super shady and somehow his silver-spooned kid has a powerful lobbying firm, seems even shadier. And then there's his wife, who died in an explosion on their yacht that was parked off their Chesapeake Bay waterfront property. Yet it was called an accident—faulty wiring in the boat short-circuited and caught a propane tank on fire. None of that ever stacked up for me. I

even wrote an article about it with interviews about Patricia Sterling or Tricia as folks called her. I could never really tell if she was an awful person or a wonderful person; the people I interviewed gave quite the mix of thoughts about the elusive woman who was quiet and seldom seen out in public. Her husband though is notorious and has ties to all sorts of criminals. It seemed he had buried his past after meeting her in college. Yet I still suspect that Theo Sterling is anything but a good person. And I can't imagine that Conner falls far from that tree.

And then there's their fraternity. Theta Omega Delta. And not just any chapter of the fraternity. The chapter that Conner, Aiden, Sebastian, their fathers, and close friends belong to is a who's who of power. There are a few other chapters with quite a list of powerful members, but theirs is particularly intriguing. Hell, the current president was a member as was his press secretary. So, what gives? I have my theories but proving them is not something I've ever been able to do.

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I throw on some yoga pants and a t-shirt before settling in at my desk. I need to do some more research tonight. This time, I want to work on the missing girls. I was able to write one article about them recently that got praise from the editorial staff. I'm hoping they'll let me write some more. Switching to the crime division and being able to do longer crime investigative stories would be a dream come true. I mean I love my local city investigative journalism gig, but crime investigations would be amazing. I'm all about the underdog and bringing down the big criminals and this city is full of criminals; it's just these criminals have three little things that most do not—power, wealth, and prestige.

Chapter3

Conner

Aiden looks at me. "Your father?"

I nod as I grab another bottle of water from the fridge in my home gym.

"Is she certain? She was pretty medicated when I last saw her at the hospital. Maybe I should talk to her." Aiden had all but evaporated after we confirmed that Alexis would be fine. I knew he was working on getting information for us, but I swear that man can downright disappear into a lab for days on end. Sebastian had said he was talking with his ex-girlfriend, Estella Garcia about the drugs found in the women in the park, which shocked me, considering how badly that ended.

"Aid, she identified him just off my voicemail message. She was absolutely certain."

“Shit. Have you spoken to your father yet?”

I give him a knowing look.

“Well, what are you going to say if you get ahold of him?” he questions as he leans on my treadmill.

“No fucking clue. I can’t exactly come out and ask if he kidnapped anyone lately. Any word on the chemicals they found in Alexis?”

Aiden shakes his head. “I talked with her doctor and am waiting to hear. We should get the results today.”

He pauses, and I stop my running. “What?”

He runs a hand through his hair, giving it a tug. “I called Ella.”

I raise an eyebrow at the mention of his ex and particularly the use of her nickname. I’m also intrigued that he’s flat-out admitting this to me, which just confirms what Sebastian had claimed he was doing. He sighs and drops his head to the arm of the treadmill. “She’s analyzing the chemical compound samples I managed to acquire from the girls in the park.”

“How’d you do that, Nancy Drew?”

He chuckles. “Let’s just say I have friends at the morgue and hospital.”

“Do these friends keep their fucking mouths shut?”

Aiden flicks me off before pushing away from the treadmill and walking to the far wall of the room where I have a half basketball court. He picks up a ball and dribbles

it before shooting a three-pointer. “Yes.”

“Good. We don’t need any more trouble.”

Aiden turns and stares at me. “Pound, we are beyond trouble. We’re fucked. Sebastian has us battling not just one demon, but all of hell.”

He’s not wrong. “You still with us or do you want out?” I ask.

He slowly walks up to me. I might be taller, but Aiden has spent a decade working out like he’s training for a triathlon, and he could most definitely hold his own against me.

“I will always have your backs; you know that.” He takes a deep breath. “Odds are not in our favor. We’re about to enter the belly of the beast, my friend, and I’m not sure if any of us will come out the other end alive.”

I reach out and place a hand on his shoulder. “There are no finer men that I’d rather go down with if that’s the case.” And I mean those words.

He nods his agreement.

My phone buzzes and I look down at my smartwatch. It’s Sebastian.

I press call on my watch, not bothering to read his text.

“Do you fucking read?” Sebastian answers with a growl.

Aiden snickers and I glare at the speaker on my watch. I don’t bother answering.

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“I’m a little preoccupied at the moment, but Alexis’s test results came back.”

Aiden and I look at each other. We both know what he’s going to say before the words echo in the vastness of the gym.

“From what I can tell based on the information the doctor sent Alexis, it matches Tina’s. A few small tweaks, but it’s nearly the same. And I’d bet it matches the girls recently found in the park.”

“Fuck,” Aiden and I reply simultaneously.

“Yeah, fuck. Aiden’s there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” he replies as he walks closer to me.

“I’m gonna encrypt this and send it to you. Did you talk to Ella?”

“I did. She agreed to help. I’ll forward whatever you send.”

“Good. I think we’re going to need her expertise.” There’s a pause. “Listen, I need to go, but I’ll come by later. We should talk.”

I decide it’s time to go into the city. I need to do some work at my office and my favorite bar is calling my name.

* * *

After several hours of work, I roll up to my old stomping grounds. It's a dive bar, but I love it. I walk up to the counter and order my favorite beer. It's not my normal drink, but at this bar it is.

"And here I thought beer was beneath you," a sultry voice says to my right.

I turn to find Vivienne Westerly sitting there with her usual glass of white wine. Why I know this woman's favorite drink is beyond me. And how in the hell did she find me, again. I curse the fates for having brought one of the people I loathe the most to me at a moment when I could use a friendly face.

"Fuck off," I growl as I grab my beer and down half of it.

"Slow down, you'll end up getting kicked out."

I glare at her as I down the rest of my beer and place it on the counter, motioning to the bartender for another without even looking in his direction.

"Does being an asshole come naturally to you through your genetics or was it a learned behavior?" she asks as she runs her finger around the rim of her glass.

"I don't know. You tell me?" I retort as I pick up the fresh glass of beer that's been set in front of me.

"Can we call a five-minute truce, Sterling?" she asks as she raises the glass to her red lips. Why does this demon have to look like sin personified?

"And why would I do that, pray tell?"

She sets her glass down and leans toward me. I can smell her perfume, a mix of roses and lavender.

“Because I believe we both have information that the other might find useful, and”—she pauses, clearly for effect—“I think we may also have a common...person of interest.”

I raise my eyebrows. “OK, I’m intrigued,” I admit, although I’m mentally putting on all my defensive body armor. This woman can’t be trusted.

She looks around the bar and leans closer to me, a single stray hair touches my face as she whispers in my ear, “We should talk somewhere private.”

My defenses go from closing the gates to preparing for battle. What is this woman playing at?

Part of me wants to say “fuck no” and throw down a twenty before leaving. But as she pulls back and looks into my eyes, I see something else, fear? If she’s scared, why is she coming to me? Hell, this woman should be afraid of me. I’ve made it perfectly known that I’d like nothing more than to decimate her. Yet she’s sitting here wanting a private audience with me.

I weigh my options. I could walk out on the street, but I don’t know who’s here and who’s listening to us. I could take her to my penthouse, but I feel like she’ll end up writing a story about my “fuck pad” and that’s not a side of me that I’m willing to expose any more than it already is. So, I do probably the least logical thing.

“We can talk at my house,” I announce as I drop forty dollars on the bar to cover both our tabs. I’m bringing her back to my lair because there, I’m king. I have a home-court advantage. And my home screams of all the silver-spoon-in-mouth comments she has written. So, fine, she can write more, but then it’ll be repetitive, and I know she doesn’t write repetition. It’s a calculated move on my part, she just doesn’t know it yet.

“Y-your house?” she stammers giving me a confused look.

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“Yes. My house.” I don’t say another word as I walk to the door and open it, holding it for a second to see if she’ll follow me. I give her five seconds, counting slowly because some sick part of me wants her to come along. Five. Four. Three. Two. I feel her standing at the threshold and I glance back. She adjusts her coat and steps through as I release the door. We walk in silence to my car.

I grin when I see her face. I have three cars. One for play. One for fun. One for work. My pickup truck is my work car. Because my truck was one hundred percent tax-deductible. It’s not the car people would think of me driving, but it’s my favorite of the cars. Albeit it’s not the most practical city car.

I open the door for her and watch her attempt to get in. I offer my hand for assistance, but she bats it away and ungracefully launches herself inside. I smirk as I walk around the vehicle.

“Comfortable?” I ask with a sugary smile as I watch her attempt to pull the seat belt across her lap. It catches and she jerks on it in frustration. I can’t help myself. I reach over her and gently glide the belt over her body, the back of my hand grazing her breast. She breathes in deeply as I fasten the buckle. I wait until I hear the click to let go.

“Thank you,” she mutters and looks away from me as though the sidewalk outside is the most interesting thing in the world.

I’ve gotten under her skin, and nothing brings me more pleasure than to poke the bear, especially since I’m a much larger bear. I hate admitting that this fiery little pain in my ass is providing a much-needed distraction from the current events in my life.

I drive us out of the city and back to Kensington Place. She watches the road the entire time as though making eye contact with me might cause her to combust. God, I love making her squirm. I start concocting a list of things I can say to make her angry. It brings a smile to my face.

“What the heck are you so happy about?” she asks, her face still fixed on the windshield.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I quip.

She groans and crosses her arms, which only serves to push her breasts up, giving me a better view of them in her V-neck sweater. She sees her mistake too late and sets her hands in her lap. Smirking, I pull up to the gate and it opens, allowing us entry into my exclusive neighborhood. I wonder if she’s ever been here before. She runs in our circle. She may have very well attended a holiday or birthday party for one of my brothers.

I sense no shock at the wealth surrounding us. I don’t know much about her upbringing, but considering who her grandfather is, I assume opulence was part of it.

I pull up the drive to my home through a canopy of trees that create a tunnel effect. I purposefully had a landscape architect design my yard so that the house cannot be seen from the street. When the leaves are in full bloom, you don’t see any part of my home until you clear the driveway and pull up to my castle.

I grin as I watch Vivienne’s reaction. Yes, my home resembles an actual castle. When my architect asked me what style of home I wanted, I showed him a picture of a French chateau that I had visited as a child with my mother. My happy memories with my mother are limited since I spent a great deal of my childhood at a boarding school. But that day was magical. The chateau looked like something out of a storybook with its towers, stone, and gardens. I half expected a knight to ride up on a

horse. It was a family friend's property, and they had invited us for the day. I played in the gardens with his children, skipped rocks in the pond, and ate cookies under a tree. It was one of the most normal days I had ever had, and I cherished each and every moment of it. My mother was happy that day, so relaxed. And I was able to be a normal child, living out a fantasy filled with heroes, where good conquered evil.

I pull up to the front door. I don't use it often, but today I feel like impressing. I park my car in the circular drive. She's out of the car before I can round it to open the door. I walk up to the entrance and the door opens automatically once it scans my eye and reads my vitals. Yes, my smart home is filled with items that read my vitals. It's a safety precaution. If my body says I'm scared or nervous or injured, it will automatically alert the police if I don't override it.

The door swings open, and I step inside followed by Vivienne. She pauses as I tell the house to turn on the entry lights. An antique chandelier from a castle in Germany that I bought at auction five years ago hangs above us. Matching sconces dot the hallways on either side of the grand entrance. I decide not to show her every part of my home. To be fair, the house is nearly ten thousand square feet and would take several hours to adequately show someone all the features, art, and antiques. Several architecture magazines have requested to photograph it, and I've denied every request. I like my privacy. Instead of giving her a tour, I walk us into my library.

I can only guess what type of man or monster she thinks I am. And the pleasure that I might be able to shock her is probably more than I'd like to admit. I lead her to the room and push open the large hand-carved double doors to reveal my favorite part of my home.

Chapter4

Vivienne

“Renoir...” I trail off as I stare at painting after painting hanging on the walls of the two-story library. There are at least a half dozen of them, and they are paintings of families. I only recognize them from an art history class I took as an elective in college.

“Yes,” he mutters as he walks over to a cart and pours a glass of scotch. He raises it to me, but I shake my head. He brings the glass to his lips and takes a long sip. How can drinking be so seductive?

“I didn’t know you collected art,” I admit. How did I not know this? I thoroughly researched this man. I should know everything.

“It’s not something I share. This is my own private collection,” he states as he surveys his art.

“Are they...” I trail off because I realize my question is silly. Of course, they are real.

“Yes. I only buy original artwork.”

Nodding, I walk up to one and look at it as though in a museum, only I’m not in a museum. I’m in a man’s home, a man I despise.

I run my fingers over the spines of the books as I peruse them. They look to be arranged by topic. Glancing up at the two stories of shelving, I can’t help wondering who cleans this room.

“Why do you pretend to be an ignorant brute?” I ask, my back turned to him.

He doesn’t reply, so I swivel to find him walking toward a shelf where he pulls down a book. He saunters across the room, a slow stroll as though he hasn’t a care in the world. I take in his tall frame as he approaches me. Everything about Conner Sterling

screams “run away,” yet I don’t, because I’m too mesmerized by the way his arm muscles flex as he walks. How can a beastly man be both scary and sexy all at the same time?

He stops in front of me and hands me a copy of *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. I take it, turning it over once before handing it back.

“Read it. Then you’ll understand,” he says, not taking the book from my hands.

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I roll my eyes. “I have. What, is acting stupid a strategy for you?”

He turns away, yet I have an odd suspicion that he’s smirking at me.

“You thought I was an ignoramus, now, didn’t you?” he says, his voice laced with mirth.

I turn away from him. “Well, let’s just say I didn’t expect to walk into a home with not only an art collection but also a book collection and have you, said owner, actually know things about both.”

“You can keep that one if you like. I have several copies,” he states. Of course, he does.

I set the book on a table, deciding to cut right to the chase. “What do you know about Jared Pallin?”

I watch closely for a reaction, but Conner merely steps over to a wingback chair and sits down. “The head of Confervo?”

“I know he’s a person of interest to you, Congressman North, and your friend, Aiden Thomas.”

His reaction is subtle, but his eyes widen slightly. “Well, he’s a potential funder for North’s campaign.”

He takes a sip of his drink, and I contemplate what I want to divulge. “I know there

may be a connection to a drug they made that never got FDA approval and the drug used in the recent park murders.” I may have a friend at the nearby hospital. Aiden Thomas thinks he’s the only one with connections, but he’s very wrong about that.

“And what connection do you think exists?” he asks as he sets his glass down and leans forward, placing his elbows on his thighs. A tattoo that resembles a snake peeks out from under his rolled-up sleeve. A deep desire in me begins to bubble to the surface. I would like very much to see the rest of the tattoo.

I close my eyes for a second, needing a moment of not looking at this god of a man in order to compose myself. This part is just a hunch and I’m not sure I want to ask him, but if I don’t, I’ll miss my opportunity. I bite my lip and then release it, cursing myself for giving away my hesitancy.

“Do you have access to the port?” I ask.

“Of course,” he states with a raised eyebrow.

“What if...what if I had a shipping manifesto and it showed that cargo was arriving tonight that might contain some...additional items?”

“Such as?”

“Such as unapproved drugs that may or may not be sold on the black market.” My evidence is fairly solid, but I’m not one hundred percent sure.

“Then, I would say you should call the police,” Conner quips as he stands and goes to pour himself another glass of scotch.

“What if I don’t trust the police?”

He turns and leans on a built-in wet bar. “Why not?”

He has to know. The police chief in Baltimore has connections to the brotherhood as does the port authority police chief. “They have...connections,” I explain.

“And what good am I in all of this?” he questions.

“You have access to the port, and your father’s ships.”

“My father?”

“Yes...your father.”

I can see an emotion briefly flash across his features. He doesn’t like his father. But why? Theo Sterling is an asshole. There’s no doubt about that, but I always assumed Conner was one too. Like father, like son. Could I be wrong?

Conner glances over my shoulder, and I turn to see a giant brass antique clock.

“You can drive,” he declares as he sets down his glass and walks out of the room.

“I can what?” I ask as I follow him. Where’s he going in the middle of a conversation?

I follow him into his garage. It’s immaculate. It doesn’t even look like a garage but rather a room. The floors don’t even appear to be concrete.

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He presses his thumb to a cabinet door and it pops open, revealing car keys neatly hung on hooks. He grabs one and hits the unlock button on the fob. He keeps his cars locked in his garage on this property. This man has some serious trust issues.

I glance at the car that just beeped and my jaw drops. He tosses me the fob. Maybe I was wrong about the trust issues.

“You want me to drive that?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

The car in question is a McLaren. It’s sleek and black and worth more money than my crappy one-bedroom condo in D.C.

“You do know how to drive stick, yes?” he asks raising his own eyebrow. What. An. Asshole.

I open the door and get in, running my hand along the steering wheel. This car is going to be fun to drive. I turn on the car. The garage door in front of us opens, although I’m not sure how that was activated as I haven’t even moved the car yet.

“Where exactly are we going?” I inquire as I glance over at him.

He strokes his nicely trimmed beard. “I’ve lost my motherfucking mind, so we’re going to my father’s shipyard.”

“I’m sorry, what? Like, right now?” My grip on the steering wheel tightens as I realize he’s actually going to go with me. This could be my big story break. I’m not sure if I should trust him, yet a part of me does, and I have no idea why.

He smirks and leans forward over the center console. “You wanted to go. I’m taking you. I’ve had a drink and don’t feel like driving, so guess who’s driving us?”

I point to myself.

“Bingo. Maybe you are smarter than I thought.”

I glare at him. “You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

He shrugs as he leans back in his seat. “I never claimed not to be an asshole, now, did I? I was going to check this out myself, but since you seem to be onto the same fact pattern as I am, I suppose, on this one issue, we can join forces.”

“Oh, we can ‘join forces’?” I raise an eyebrow, and it’s returned with a look of death from Conner. How can a man I loathe be so fucking sexy when he’s pissed? Couldn’t the universe have made him a troll, so I could keep hating him and also not find him attractive?

“What are you waiting for? Tick-tock, Vivienne. My offer expires in a minute unless you get us out of here. And you should hurry, because if you don’t, my security may follow us,” he adds with a wink. Fuck. Now I have to worry about being followed by good guys and bad guys. Just fucking perfect.

“Hold on,” I say, returning his wink with one of my own as I peel out of the garage and down his long driveway.

“Whoa!” he yelps as his hand comes down hard on my thigh and grips it tightly. I let off the gas a little and look over at him. He leaves his hand there for a long moment, and I can’t say I hate it.

“What? If you didn’t want me taking full advantage of driving a car like this, then

you should have handed over the keys to the beast you drove to the bar,” I explain as I drive us down his street, slowing so the gate can open once we reach the main road. He slowly peels his fingers off me, and I immediately miss the heat of his hand.

“Do you know where to go?” he asks.

I nod. “At this time of night, it shouldn’t take more than an hour to get there...or less,” I add with a grin as I floor it.

I glance over and find him grinning a little. Boys.

“Care to tell me why you think that my father’s shipping company is somehow involved in alleged crimes?” he asks as I take an on-ramp onto I-95.

“Like I said, I saw some documents.” Is he messing with me? He should know the answer to his own question. I feel like I’m being tested and I don’t fucking like it.

“And is this going to be part of some article published this week in The Tribune?”

I groan. “No.” I pause because I, unlike some people, don’t lie, well, mostly not. “It may be part of an investigative piece that I publish, eventually, but it’s nowhere near done yet.”

“Good. I’ll help you this once, but you have to promise that anything I say to you is confidential and off the record,” he states. This once? I’m still shocked he’s helping me at all. He must want answers as badly as I do, hell, maybe even more.

I look over at him. “Fine.” I don’t like agreeing to this, but maybe I can get him to come around later. Interviewing Conner Sterling would bring a certain dynamic to my story. Conner is a bit of an enigma, or at least that’s what I’m learning. After this evening, I might just hate him a little less, at least for now.

Chapter5

Conner

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“Why journalism?” I ask once we’re on the beltway. I’m trying to distract myself from both her driving and my horrible rash decision to take us to my father’s shipyard while letting her drive my most expensive car.

She’s quiet and for a moment I’m not sure she has even heard my question.

“Rupert Clarington,” she states.

“The famous investigative journalist? Didn’t he do some scathing expose on your grandfather when he was in office?”

She nods.

“I don’t get it,” I say.

“He made me see my own family in a different light. Do you not understand how hard it is to turn someone’s entire vantage point upside down? But he did. He was good at his job and he’s the reason my grandfather never saw a second term.”

“He’s also dead,” I mutter. I can only imagine his “accidental” death from falling off a ladder while repairing a broken security light at his horse barn was no accident at all. I remember my father’s whispered conversations around that time. The brotherhood was pissed, and Rupert was their target. First, they dug up every scandalous thing they could about him, which wasn’t much, and then when they couldn’t take him down by the harsh court of public opinion, they decided to get rid of him permanently, or I assume that’s what happened. The elite controls us, and we rarely know the endgame.

“He is. And that just lit more of a fire under me to find the truth and not stop until I do,” she explains.

“I imagine that your family doesn’t approve.”

She looks over at me. I glance over for a moment. Our gazes lock for a fraction of a second before she looks back away.

“No, my family doesn’t approve...of anything I do,” she confesses.

“Well, I guess we have something in common,” I murmur.

“Your father doesn’t approve of your life choices?” she prods.

“Something like that.” I don’t want to say more because while I trust her more now than I did several hours ago, I don’t trust that what I say won’t somehow end up printed on the pages of *The Tribune*.

“But, you’re successful and wealthy,” she says, motioning to the luxurious interior of the car.

“Success and wealth aren’t exactly all that matters in my father’s world.”

“What matters, then?”

I sigh and run a hand over my neatly trimmed beard. “Power, wealth, and prestige matter, but most of all, loyalty and silence.”

“The vow,” she says.

I can’t stop my head from swiveling in her direction.

She laughs at my reaction. “Don’t look so shocked. First, I was in a sorority, so I know how Greek life works. I’ve dug far enough to know that whoever is part of this ‘brotherhood’ is likely part of a more secretive part of it. And with all brotherhoods, you take some kind of vow, and I imagine the reward for loyalty and silence is the power, wealth, and prestige. Am I off base?”

Her words echo in the car, and I can only hope the damn thing isn’t bugged. My new security team has been debugging things for weeks, but I don’t know the last time they swept for them in here. I should have made sure before we left. I internally curse myself for making a rash and uncalculated decision.

I decide to switch the conversation back to her.

“What about your brother?” I ask.

“Interviewing the journalist?” she states with a knowing smile.

“Perhaps, or perhaps I just want to know more about the woman driving my car,” I say as I feel myself sobering up at a faster rate than I thought possible.

“I keep in touch with him and my grandmother.”

“No one else?”

She shakes her head. “Truthfully?” She pauses and we lock eyes again. I nod and she continues. “I think my grandmother is a pawn used to get intel from me, but my brother and I have an understanding. He doesn’t agree with me being out of line, but he also doesn’t approve of all the decisions our family has made. He just prefers the path of least resistance.”

“He’s weak,” I rephrase.

“He’s...more dependent upon them,” she clarifies. I wonder what she means by that, but I don’t press her further.

“Do you trust others beyond Sebastian and Aiden?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Why them?”

I shrug. “I have my reasons. Who do you trust?”

She looks straight ahead, and that answer is all the answer I need. “You trust no one,” I murmur in a bit of awe and also sadness for this woman I loathe. What a lonely existence.

“I have friends. I don’t need some pity party. I just...there isn’t anyone that I trust one hundred percent,” she admits, her jaw tight as she speaks. She’s given away a chink in her armor and that surprises me. What else will Vivienne Westerly reveal tonight?

“You aren’t how I thought you would be,” I admit.

She looks over at me with narrowed eyes. “How exactly did you think I would be?”

I smirk.

“Oh, for the love of God. I don’t have a giant wart on my nose, and I don’t cast magic spells on my enemies,” she groans.

I can’t fight the laugh that erupts from the depths of my chest. “Wow, you really took that all the way, now, didn’t you?”

She glares at me, and it only makes me smirk more. Why does getting under her skin make me so damn happy? I decide it’s better if I don’t answer that question, because the reasons I had before tonight are not the ones I currently have.

“Do you like being a journalist?” I ask.

“Of course. Do you like being a lobbyist?”

I shrug. “Sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

“Yes. Does anyone love their job all the time?”

“Yes.”

I laugh again. “Who? I’d love to meet this person.”

I’m a bit surprised when a far-off smile graces her face. Her features soften a bit, and she looks, even more beautiful.

“What?”

She widens her smile on what I can only suspect is a very happy memory. “My first year reporting, I was asked to cover a local story. There was a woman who was

turning one hundred and two years old. I went to a house to interview her. Most people her age are in nursing homes, but she was still living in her home. She had a woman come in each day to help her, but she was still active and lucid. She made us sandwiches and iced tea, and we ate in her garden. It was the most beautiful garden that I'd ever seen. A little oasis here in the city. She was a florist and gardener. Her late husband and she had owned a little florist shop for sixty years. Her granddaughter had just recently taken over the business, but she still went in every few days to help out with arrangements. I asked her if she liked it and she said that she didn't like it, she loved it and arranging and growing flowers was more than something she loved, it was her. She felt it defined her. I couldn't believe that at first. I insisted there must have been at least one bad day here or there. She said no. She said she never viewed something going the way she didn't want it to as bad; she said those days were just challenges and she liked challenges. She liked to see ways to solve problems, so those days were her most fun days. She was so optimistic and happy. She said doing what she did brought joy to people on their best and worst days and what better could she do with her life than spread joy. She died a year or so after that interview. She was buried in a local botanical garden where she was still volunteering on weekends right up till the end. I went to her funeral and person after person stood up and spoke of her absolute love of flowers. So, yes"—she turns to me—"that was someone that never had a bad day at her job."

"Well, that's quite a story," I state as I study her face.

"She was quite a lady."

"Sounds like it."

I look back at the road. We're getting close.

"What do you think we're going to find?" I ask.

“I...don’t know exactly. I’m not sure how they are bringing the medicine in, I mean whether it’s coming in a pill form or liquid or disguised as something else,” she admits.

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Great. So not only are we looking for a needle in a haystack, we don't even know if we're looking for a needle. Sebastian and Aiden always say that I'm reactive, and this right now is proof of that. I should have asked what she knew before we left. There's no way we are going to find what we are looking for, it's an impossible task.

We ride in silence for a while more until she turns off to the port in Baltimore. The roads back here are uneven and she laughs.

"Uh, your utility vehicle might have been a better choice," she states with an eye roll. I want so badly to bend her over my knee and smack her ass. Little does she know that this sleek, low-to-the-ground vehicle is easier to hide out here. My utility vehicle is giant and white.

"We aren't going any farther in this vehicle," I explain as I point to a small parking area. There's another way into the shipyard, but I want to watch it for a while first. She pulls up and turns off the car.

"Now what?" she asks.

"Now we wait."

Chapter6

Vivienne

"What are we waiting for?" I prod as I sit, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Just wait a minute. We need the next truck to come through and the gate to open. I want to see what’s going on in there before we do anything.”

My mouth falls open. “Wait? You’re telling me you don’t have access to your father’s shipping yard?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. His answer is more of a grunt than a word.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I don’t have access to any of my father’s properties,” he mutters quietly through gritted teeth.

Wow. Just wow. I way underestimated the relationship between Conner and Theo Sterling.

Conner’s phone buzzes and he looks down at it. “Interesting.”

“Gonna share that with the class?” I ask as I glare at him.

“Nope.”

“Fuck off, Sterling, what the hell are you playing at?”

He turns toward me the best he can with his tall frame in this small interior space.

“This just got a lot harder.”

My mind goes somewhere it shouldn’t. Damn him. Why couldn’t Conner be ugly?

He raises a suggestive eyebrow and I groan as a smirk spreads across his face.

“For the love of God, just... Ugh!” I groan as I turn away from him and look out at the river in front of us.

I feel his hand on my thigh again. I want to jerk away to show him that I mean business, but the way he tightly grips me there has my traitorous body wanting him to do other things to it.

“What?” I clip as I keep my focus on the water in front of us.

“Aiden says his intel believes that this drug is coming in a liquid form, which is going to take our search from a needle in a haystack to an asteroid in a galaxy.”

I finally turn to him. “Could you possibly be more difficult to understand?”

He points to some refrigerated cargo containers. “We don’t even know how much of it is being brought in on the ship. Do you have any idea how many containers of various liquid materials come through here on a daily basis?”

I shrug. He knows that I know this because I’ve seen the shipping logs.

“So, do you see the problem now?” he asks, emphasizing the last word. Is he going to murder me? He could strangle me with his bare hands. I glance down at his hand and swallow. I was so focused on getting my big story break, I acted carelessly. I should have gotten better intel before I even thought about approaching Conner. I just made a rookie mistake. Damn it!

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“I suppose,” I admit begrudgingly.

“What do you suggest we do, then?” He raises a valid point, and I have no idea what our next step should be.

“Well, let me think for a minute.” I go back to tapping my finger until his hand releases from my thigh and covers my hand, stilling it.

I glance over at him. He’s watching me intently. “Has anyone ever told you that you are wound very tight?”

“More than once,” I retort.

“Well, then, maybe you should do something about that before you give yourself a coronary.”

“Maybe you should worry about yourself.”

He grins. “Don’t worry, I have plenty of ways to relieve stress.”

I huff and roll my eyes at his childish comment. Men.

“Jared,” he states.

“What?” I ask, my brows knitting together in confusion.

“Jared Pallin, maybe...if we could just get some intel, we could narrow the window

down to an arrival date. If I knew the date, it makes our search...plausible," he muses as he brings his thumb and forefinger up to stroke his beard. My brain fragments, part of it following his chain of logic while the other is mesmerized with his facial hair and wanting to know how scratchy it would feel against the inside of my thighs.

"We could go to the pharmaceutical association gala..." I offer as I try to remember Jared's schedule over the next week.

"When's the gala?" he asks.

"This weekend."

"Why don't you just go solo?"

I look at him and tip my head a bit, as if to say, figure it out, buddy.

He smacks his forehead. "Let me guess, you can't get in without me?"

I nod and smile sheepishly.

"Am I going to get crucified if I roll up with you on my arm?" His question is a fair one.

I shrug. "Probably not, although it may raise some eyebrows."

"Great, just what I need right now, more unwanted attention."

I lean back in the seat. "It's just an idea."

"Right, just an idea," he grumbles as he looks at the shipping yard once more. "Let's head back. There's nothing we can do tonight, knowing what we know now."

I can't say he's wrong. If it's in a refrigerated container, we could spend all night here and still not find it.

I sigh and put the car in reverse as I start back toward the road.

"Disappointed that our adventure didn't pan out for you?"

"No, and yes," I admit as I steer us back to I-95. I glance in my rearview mirror and see a car following us. I turn and it turns. I turn again and it turns. I do this several more times.

"You just missed the exit," Conner states as he points toward the sign.

"We're being followed," I explain.

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“Fuck.” He whips out his phone and calls someone, the car’s Bluetooth picks up and I hear a deep, gravelly voice answer.

“Gallagher.”

“Bryce, when did your team last sweep my cars?”

“Last week, why?”

“Fuck. I think the McLaren is bugged.”

“Why do you think that?”

Conner looks behind us and glances back over at me. “Because I’m being followed.”

“Shit. Hold on.” There’s silence for a moment.

“Why are you at the port of Baltimore? And where’s my team?”

“Research. And, I maybe ditched them.”

I hear some curse words muttered on the other line. “Alright, I just got into the city camera system. It looks like a black sedan with tinted windows. I’m running the plates now.”

I look over at Conner and mouth, “What?”

Conner hits mute on the car. “Bryce runs my security. He’s watching us through cameras,” he points to a traffic camera on the road.

“Fucking big brother-y,” I murmur as I continue to drive. “Where should I go?”

He unmutes the car and asks Bryce where to go.

“Get on I-95 at the next intersection,” Bryce commands. “Wait. Who the hell is driving?”

I grin and wave at a camera on the side of the road.

Conner shakes his head and runs a hand over his face. “That would be Vivienne Westerly.”

“I don’t even want to know what you two were doing, do I?”

“Nope.”

“Great. Are you on 95 yet?”

I pull onto the on-ramp and merge into traffic. The car follows us.

“Yes, we just got on.”

“Then, floor it and take the far-right lane when you get to the tunnel. The left lanes are blocked after the tunnel with an accident that hasn’t shown up on the navigation systems yet.”

I floor it and enjoy the revving of the engine as I speed through traffic. The car behind us keeps pace with ours, and I begin moving around cars as Conner braces

himself against the passenger door. I grin as I shift and then, at the last minute, jerk the wheel to put us in the far-right lane. A car cuts off the car that's following us, forcing them to stay in the left lanes.

I speed through the tunnel and continue around the accident scene at a slower speed before testing out the car once more as I weave in and out of traffic.

When I get us south of the Baltimore beltway, I ease up on the gas.

“He’s stuck at the accident scene. You’re clear. You may want to be careful with where you go tonight. I’m not the only one who can hack cameras. I’m sending men over to watch your penthouse and home. I’ll have your other cars swept. Leave the McLaren out when you get home.”

“Will do.”

“And stay the fuck out of trouble,” Bryce mutters as he hangs up.

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“He’s a real sweetheart,” I state as I get in the fast lane and head back toward Conner’s house.

“Why do I feel like this isn’t your first high-speed chase?” Conner asks.

I laugh as I look over at him. “Let’s just say the one time I snuck out as a teenager, I couldn’t exactly get a speeding ticket or I’d have been screwed, so...no, not my first time. But it is my second time escaping.”

He shakes his head, and I see him smile as he looks out the passenger window. “Something makes me think that you are going to be a real handful, Vivienne Westerly,” he says to himself.

“You wouldn’t be the first man to say that,” I reply under my breath.

He chuckles. “Now that doesn’t surprise me at all.”

I give him a saccharine smile. “Whatever do you mean?”

His laugh intensifies. “I’ll give it to you, you don’t lack personality.”

“It’s my charm, isn’t it?”

He shakes his head. “It’s something.”

“See what you’ve been missing all these years? And to think, you’ve spent all this time hating me.”

On that comment, his smile fades, and he looks away again. Maybe I pressed the wrong button with that comment?

He looks back at me with a serious face. “You’re still on my shit list.”

Shit. He’s not wrong. While our “mortal enemies” status might have ended, it seems it was only downgraded to regular enemies.

Chapter 7

Conner

I look out at the city. This hotel always keeps a room available for my father, who seldom uses it, so I have decided to finally take advantage of something from being his son. I straighten my bow tie as I assess myself in the reflection of the window, the Washington Monument cutting my image in half. Touché, Washington D.C., touché. I turn and head to the bar to wait for Vivienne, who insisted she just meet me here. But for appearances, we have to enter the gala as a couple. I can’t believe I agreed to this. I contemplate my momentary lapse of intelligence as I ride the elevator down to the lobby. Who am I kidding? From the moment she talked me into meeting privately with her, all my judgment flew right out the fucking window.

I look around as I walk into the bar, but she’s not here yet. So, I take a seat and wait for the bartender. He comes over and begins to ask for my drink order but stops mid-question and looks across the room. His eyes widen a little and then he immediately finishes asking me if I want their signature bacon in my bourbon, to which I say no. He quickly turns and walks away to get my drink. I swivel to see what has him so flustered. As my eyes survey the room, they find the source of his gaze.

Fucking hell. Vivienne Westerly is gorgeous on a bad day, but this woman before me is a fucking piece of art. She belongs on my wall next to my Picassos and Renoirs.

She's wearing a black cocktail dress that has one strap. It's tasteful and elegant and accentuates every curve of her frame. Her hair is pulled up into some sort of twisted knot on the top of her head. My dirty mind immediately envisions gripping it as I slam my cock between those red lips of hers. Her makeup looks to be professionally done. I've seen former model girlfriends have their makeup artists spend two hours on their faces before we attend events. Yet, somehow, I don't think Vivienne called a professional. I think Vivienne is a professional. She has on dangling diamond earrings and a matching diamond-studded tennis bracelet. It surprises me that a woman so beautiful decided to become a journalist and not a model or an actress. She could sell a pool to a man who can't swim with the way she looks right now. And that sharp tongue of hers...let's just say I'd like to feel it more than I want to hear it right now.

I try to adjust myself discreetly as I turn to stand and pull out a chair for her.

"Good evening," I state as I motion for her to sit.

She looks me up and down and I don't miss her lips curving into a smirk. That little siren thinks she's won this battle. I'll let her live in her make-believe world...for now.

"Hi, Brett," she says with a warm smile to the bartender.

"You look lovely this evening, Vivienne. The usual?" he asks.

"Yes, please." She turns to me, and I cock my head to one side. How does she know everyone in this town? Do they not see through her yet? Do they not see that she's using them for her gain? My momentary lust turns to anger as I remember the unkind words she wrote about my mother all those years ago. No one should ever speak ill of the dead.

"What?" she asks, her eyes trained on me as if she can read me. I scoff at that. I've

worked for years at masking my feelings. No one knows what I'm thinking, ever, and that's how I like it.

"Nothing." I'm saved from further conversation when Brett sets a glass of white wine in front of her.

"Why always white wine?" I ask, motioning to her glass.

She raises an eyebrow. "Why always bourbon or whiskey?" she retorts.

I slowly sip my drink and smirk when I see her gaze drop for a millisecond to watch me swallow it. She's affected by me, and I can work with that to my advantage.

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“Because it tastes like wealth. And as you know, I don’t ‘always’ order them,” I reply coolly.

She narrows her eyes.

“What? You don’t agree?” I ask as I hold my tumbler.

She shrugs and drinks her wine. I watch her lips on the glass and am treated to the red print they leave. Shit, that red print would look so much fucking better on my dick.

She sets her drink down and turns a little in my direction. “I think that you drink bourbon because you like the taste of misogynistic power,” she says, her eyes still narrowed.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from laughing at her absurd statement. She has no idea who I really am, and her statement just made that completely clear.

“Wow. That’s a big word for such a little lady,” I reply with a sugary grin. This smile is the one thing I inherited from my asshole of a father. His British sarcasm is so dry most Americans don’t even realize when he’s made a joke.

“Well, I hope my big word wasn’t too much for your giant brain to handle. I wouldn’t want to be the straw that broke it,” she quips with an equally sugary smile.

Maybe she is smarter than I give her credit for.

We finish our drinks in silence. My phone buzzes, and I look down to see a text from

Sebastian. “Jared just arrived.”

“That’s our cue,” I state as I rise and hold out my arm for her.

She looks at it for a long moment before accepting it, her fingers barely touching my sleeve. The ice queen is back. I straighten my shoulders, rising to my full height. I’ve long learned that standing six feet and five inches tall has its advantages. Being a mountain among hills has its perks.

I spot Jared immediately upon walking into the ballroom. The shady little fuck is already saddling up to the bar for his free drink, a shitty lukewarm beer from what I can tell.

I feel Vivienne’s grip tighten on my arm. I glance down and watch as she swallows and then pushes her chest forward. Jesus, she shouldn’t do that, now all the men are going to be looking directly at her amazing rack. Some beastly part of me wants to cover her with both hands, blocking those tits from everyone’s view except my own.

“I got this,” she states as she releases my arm and struts across the room. I can’t help noticing a dozen men gawk at her as she passes them on her way to the bar. She doesn’t even realize what she does, or does she? Fuck, this woman is complicated. It makes me want to bend her over my knee and spank the living hell out of her, and it also makes me want to drive my hard cock deep into her pussy. I close my eyes for a brief second to stop myself from thinking thoughts that I have no business thinking. I wouldn’t want to fuck Vivienne if she was the last woman on the planet. Not even if she apologized for what she said about my mother.

I channel that rage and slowly walk to a bar on the opposite side of the room where Sebastian is holding court with several of our brothers. Alexis is at his side, and from the way his arm is wrapped around her waist, she’s not going anywhere without him.

He nods as I approach. Declan and Paul are chatting about their latest vehicle purchases. Aaron is on the fringe of our group chatting with a senator. Declan introduces me to a colleague that walks up to us. It's the usual small talk banter that occurs at such events before everyone has a few drinks in them and gets down to actual conversation, which is almost always trading tit for tat and making promises that they'll never keep.

Declan notices that I'm distracted and as his colleague turns to Sebastian, he leans in toward me. "Everything, alright?"

I nod. "Yeah, just making sure my date doesn't get accosted by a pharmaceutical sleezeball."

Declan chuckles and follows my gaze. "I thought we hated Vivienne?"

I shrug. "We do. But she's helping me with something."

"Oh?"

I turn to him. "Don't worry. I'm pretty sure, I still hate her."

He nods and sips his drink as Sebastian asks him about his recent yacht purchase. With everyone distracted again, I use my height advantage to watch Vivienne over top of a senator's head. She's leaning against the bar, talking animatedly to Jared who is having an entire conversation with her breasts. I find my hand clenching around my drink as I envision Jared's neck there. I take a deep breath as I bring the glass to my mouth, trying to distract myself from feeling like a protective beast toward a woman who should be burned at the stake.

I'm momentarily distracted when Heidi Garrison steps in front of me.

“Conner! How good to see you,” she says with a fake smile plastered on her face. I want to push her out of my line of vision, but then I see Vivienne turn toward me and look at Heidi. She doesn’t like that her date is talking with another woman. Jealousy. I can work with this. She wears it better than I do. I smirk and raise my glass a little in her direction as I lean in and kiss Heidi’s cheek.

“How are you?” I ask. The last time I saw Heidi, her naked ass was up in the air as I fucked it. Then I got a call and had to leave. That was two months ago. She texted me something about a shoot in Milan.

“Fine. I just got back. I loved it so much over there, I just couldn’t leave,” she gushes as she launches into a series of stories about her travels. Heidi isn’t a horrible human, she’s just a privileged model who likes the powerful men in this city. It’s her kink, and she’s not ashamed of it. She lives for being arm candy at state dinners. She may fake her smiles, but she doesn’t lie about her goals in life, and that I can appreciate.

I add the occasional “uh-huh” and “that sounds nice” to the conversation, but my peripheral vision stays with Vivienne who keeps her body language telling Jared he might get lucky. I’m impressed and loathing of it all at the same time. Why am I letting her get under my skin?

At some point, Jared leads her over to a table and they sit down. Vivienne leans in and puts her elbow on the table and her chin on her hand as she nods enthusiastically at him. There’s some boring awards ceremony that is supposed to happen after this lengthy cocktail hour and then some dancing. I’m not looking forward to any of it.

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I watch Jared place a hand on Vivienne's leg and something in me snaps. I turn to Heidi.

"It was great to see you. We'll have to catch up more later," I practically growl as I turn away from her.

I plow through the crowd toward them. What the fuck is she playing at? This was not the plan. She was only supposed to talk to him, not physically flirt with the man.

When I'm looming over them, Jared looks up, his face pales a little and he nonchalantly pulls his hand back. But it's Vivienne's look of relief that has me dialing up the rage I feel. This wasn't part of her plan, he's every bit the asshole that I thought he was.

"Vivienne, may I have a word...please." I add the last word through gritted teeth. Jared looks between us, apparently hopeful that this obscenely hot woman will choose him over me. What a fucking twat.

"Oh, of course, Conner. Conner, this is Jared Pallin. Jared, Conner Sterling." He nods at me, and I nod at him. Neither of us says a word.

"Excuse us, Jared. I'll definitely give you a call this week," she says with a smile as she stands and this time takes my outstretched arm with such force I fear she may cut off circulation. I lead us out of the ballroom and down a hallway to the back elevators. I never use the main ones here because I don't like prying eyes.

"W-where are we going?" Vivienne asks as she looks back at the gala ballroom.

The doors open and I pull her inside, walking her to the wall where she presses her back against the cool wood veneer. “You and I need to have a little chat,” I growl as I loom over her like the monster I am.

“About what? Why are you so angry? I was doing what we planned.”

“NO! You were not!” I yell after the doors slide closed.

“Fuck you, Conner,” she yells back and pushes on my chest, only I weigh over twice what she weighs, so I don’t budge.

“You were supposed to chat professionally with him, not act like some escort girl waiting to please him,” I say, my voice clipped with anger.

“An escort girl? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Isn’t that how the press gets their information? They fuck for it,” I ask as I smirk.

“Fuck you! Do you even know what a journalist does? Do you have any idea the danger I’ve put myself in just to try to get the truth out? You don’t have a damn clue, do you? You’re just a spoiled, shit for brains, oaf of a man-child, who wouldn’t know work if it smacked him in the face,” she retorts with a huff.

“I thought we were past the name-calling portion of the evening,” I state coldly. “But if we’re going there, how about that I didn’t think you were a gullible, money-hungry, two-faced whore who writes lies that ruin people’s lives!”

The elevator stops on my last word and the ping sounds as the doors open. Neither one of us moves as both our chests heave with anger.

“Get the fuck out of here,” she says as she points to the hallway outside the penthouse

suite. “This evening is over. I don’t make deals with arrogant assholes.”

I step back into the hallway. “Don’t like when someone speaks the truth, do you?”

I take another step back and am surprised when she steps out after me and pushes one finger against the middle of my chest.

“I always speak the fucking truth. I’m sorry if you don’t like it, the truth hurts sometimes, doesn’t it, Mr. Sterling, or shall I call you Pound?”

“You lied about my mother!” I yell not caring about the volume of my voice now that we are alone on this floor.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The article you published about my family’s business. You said my mother only married my father for his money, and that is not true. You said that my mother was known as a cold and heartless woman who likely had many enemies, which was the cause of her untimely death.”

She falters and frowns. “I didn’t say that.”

“I read the article. You were listed on the byline, so yes, you did,” I reply.

She shakes her head. “I quoted someone who said that, but the final version I saw had that being said by an anonymous source followed with another quote from another anonymous source saying that such rumors were untrue.”

I pause and look into her eyes. They are wide and filled with confusion. Is she fucking with me?

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” I ask.

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She narrows her eyes. “Fuck you. I’m done here. You think I’m such a horrible person, then why the hell are we here right now, riddle me that, Mr. Shit for Brains?”

“Because you wanted to get information from Jared that was going to serve a purpose for both of us; it’s a symbiotic relationship, but maybe you don’t understand what that means...” I walk her backward until her back hits the elevator doors and I lean down so our eyes are nearly level. “It means that you needed me, and I needed you, and if we worked together, we’d both get what we needed. Or maybe, that was never your endgame.”

Her lavender scent fills my flared nostrils. I swear she softly whimpers as she looks into my eyes. “I hate you,” she whispers as she licks her lips. I watch her little pink tongue dart out from between them and suddenly my cock is standing at full attention beneath my slacks.

“I hate you more,” I reply as I lose all my self-control and lean down, crashing my lips against hers. Our mouths meet in a torrent of emotions that begin to battle in my brain as I thrust my tongue against hers. She moans and I can hear the lust and frustration fighting in her sound. Her hands come to my shoulders, and for a split second, I think she’s going to push me away, but then she surprises me and pulls me closer.

I reach down and grip her ass, hauling her up my body as her legs wrap around my waist, her skirt hiking up in the process, exposing her flesh to my palms. I walk toward my room leaning my backside against the lock so that the key in my pocket activates it. It opens and I press my elbow down on the handlebar and push us inside. I swat her ass. She lets out another groan, only this time it’s pure lust. I slam her

against the wall and deepen our kiss as my right hand moves toward her center, my finger tracing the outer edge of her lace panties. I can feel her wetness on the fabric. I suddenly don't want to feel any clothing; I want her naked. I want to feel her skin sliding across mine. I blindly search for the zipper of her dress. I find it and slowly pull it down, exposing an inch of her side at a time. She's not wearing a bra and I grin against her lips like a boy who just discovered his birthday gift has been hidden in plain sight.

Her fingers begin fumbling with the buttons of my shirt as I try to extricate her arm from the strap of the dress. We are a frenzy of movement, yet I keep one hand under her, stroking her wet flesh through the thin fabric of her panties.

She releases her legs from my hips and slides down my front letting her dress fall to the ground as she pushes my shirt open and begins working on my pants. I look down at her exquisite body. She's ten times more gorgeous than I thought possible. And when she stands back up after yanking my pants and boxer briefs down with one pull, I'm treated to a sight I wasn't expecting. Above her hip bone is a small tattoo of a horse. It's a black silhouette. Unexpected. Everything about this woman is unexpected. I look to my right and find the sofa, the arm of it is the perfect height for what I have in mind. I finish pulling off my pants, underwear, and socks after kicking off my shoes. She reaches for her heels, and I stop her, shaking my head as I spin her around and bend her over the sofa's arm. I can't help myself as I palm her ass cheek and then slap it. I'm pleased with the pink mark left behind.

She turns her head. "What's that for?"

"That's for fucking driving me crazy," I growl.

I reach to the floor and pull out the condom I keep in my wallet for such occasions and make quick work of putting it on. I run one hand down her back before pulling her panties down her legs. They fall to her ankles. I look back up at her exposed

pussy. Running a single finger through her wet folds, I slide it inside her and then add another, scissoring them until I feel she's ready for me. I might be an asshole, but I'd never intentionally hurt a woman, even if I want to hate-fuck her.

I lean forward over her until my lips are nearly touching the shell of her ear. "Hang on tight," I whisper as I line myself up with her entrance and sink into her in one long thrust.

Chapter8

Vivienne

I let out a gasp as I feel Conner fill me in a single thrust. It's been a while since I've had sex, and I was in no way thinking I'd be having sex tonight, and especially not with Conner Sterling. I arch back as he pulls out and thrusts in again. I match his pace as we violently slam into each other, over and over. I grip the couch cushions. The girth of his erection stings as he moves inside me, but I don't care. I like the pain. It makes me feel alive. It reminds me how much I hate this man. I shouldn't be doing this, but I don't care. If having him this one time gets it out of my system, then bring it, Pound.

Neither of us speaks, we emit groans and grunts as our bodies slap together. Both of us greedily chase our own release. I reach down between my legs, knowing that if I can just rub my clit the right way, I can finally have the orgasm I've been needing for weeks, the one that no amount of battery-operated boyfriends can provide me.

Suddenly, my hand is slapped away. I start to protest until I feel Conner's thick fingers against my clit. His movements become rough, matching mine. I try to bring my hand back. He sandwiches my fingers between his and together our fingers circle my clit. But he's in control, not letting me move how I need to, how I want to.

“Conner!” I whimper.

“Not yet,” he growls as he picks up the pace. Damn him and his fucking need for control! I start bucking against his hand, searching for the friction I’m craving in my delusional state of near ecstasy.

His pace quickens and he finally gives me what I need. My hand drops away, as I relinquish control to his ministrations, and damn it if he doesn’t play my body like a violin.

“Oh God!” I cry out as I reach my climax. I hear him grunt from behind me as he slams into me once more. His body gives a shake as mine goes rigid, both of us momentarily lost in the depths of our releases.

I feel myself sinking against the sofa, all my muscles relax for a few seconds as my breathing goes back to normal. I slowly realize the gravity of what has just happened. No. No, no, no. I can’t sleep with Conner Sterling. What the fuck was I thinking? I mean, it was fucking good, but no.

I squirm beneath him, and he pulls out of me, making me wince a little. I reach down and pull my underwear up as he leans over the sofa and grabs a tissue, handing it to me while he turns to dispose of the condom that he somehow managed to put on. I quickly do my best to clean up, but it’s no use. I just need to get out of here. I find my dress on the floor and start putting it on. My legs are shaky from the heels and bending over for so long. I go to put a hand on the wall as I try to pull my zipper up, when Conner’s hand wraps around my waist, drawing me back against him. He’s still gloriously naked and I can feel all of him against my backside.

I swallow. Why am I so nervous? I put on my proverbial big-girl panties and slowly turn to face him. My eyes momentarily look him up and down. Holy. Shitballs. This man is...just wow. He’s tall, that I knew, he’s muscular, but not like a bodybuilder.

His muscles are large but only because he is large. His body is perfection. He must work out at least two hours a day. He looks like a fitness instructor or a model. Except for his tattoos, he has so many tattoos. Down his side, over part of his chest, and up toward his neck. On both his arms and one thigh. I could spend hours analyzing all of them. I have so many questions. I look and find him watching me. He has zero shame about his body. He knows he's good-looking, what an ass.

"I should go," I mutter as I try to yank on the zipper again.

"Allow me," he says as he reaches out and bats my hand away, he slowly tugs on the zipper and pulls it up one inch at a time as though he's fascinated by how zippers work. "There," he says as he finishes and steps back to admire his handywork as if zipping dresses takes skills.

I look around the room at his clothes that still lie on the floor. "We shouldn't have...I shouldn't have..." I trail off at a loss for words, which is a first.

I feel his hand come up to my chest and then my neck where his thumb pauses on my carotid artery for a brief moment before he moves up to my jaw. He takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger and forces my face up to meet his gaze.

"Maybe we shouldn't have, but I'm not sorry that I did. I don't want to admit we have chemistry any more than you do, but damn it if we don't." He looks away and I frown at the pained expression on his face. He drops his hand from my chin. "Go. You're right. We'll keep it strictly professional from here out."

I nod in confusion and walk to the door. "Goodnight, Conner."

"Goodnight, Vivienne," he replies as he stares out the sliding door window toward the Washington Monument, his reflection a mixture of anger and confusion that mirrors my own feelings. He picks up his phone and types a message. Perfect, he's

already moving on to work, and I haven't even made it to the door yet. I reach for the handle.

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“A car is out front. It will take you wherever you need to go,” he says quietly. I turn toward him, but he doesn’t look back at me. He just keeps staring out at the monument.

“Thank you,” I murmur as I open the door and head to the elevator. As promised, I find a car waiting out front. I give the driver my address and watch the sleepy city as we drive through the quiet streets.

My mind is racing through the events of the evening. Jared Pallin is definitely a creepy guy. So far, everything I’ve learned is telling me something is going on with his company. Before Mr. Control Freak Sterling stepped in, I did manage to get Jared’s number. I was claiming to want to interview him about how his company’s latest FDA-approved medicine has been helping children. He seemed very pleased with my idea. Now, if I can just get him alone long enough to interview him properly.

And then there’s Conner. I can’t believe I slept with him. Why did it have to be so fucking good? And why does he have to be so gorgeous? He reeks of money and everything that I hate, everything I left behind.

I’ve done a good job of leading a modest life since living in D.C. No matter how many times my grandmother and brother reach out and try to coax me back, I don’t give in because I don’t want that life. I don’t want to be known as President Westerly’s granddaughter. I never wanted to be a debutant, a trophy wife, arm candy for some power-hungry politician. And that’s what I would be if I went back to them. I know what evil lurks behind that façade of perfection. My family is a fake. It’s devoid of actual love. My brother might be the only one who loves me, and my grandmother is getting too senile to remember her place or her fake front as a doting

family matriarch.

The car stops outside my apartment and the driver opens my door and waits until I'm safely inside. I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up as I shut the door. Looking out at the dark street, I see only the driver getting back in his car. I decide I'm sensing things that aren't there and I hurry up to my second-floor apartment. I get inside and toss my heels off as I make my way to the shower. I can smell Conner's cologne on my dress as I take it off, and I briefly close my eyes as I feel the slight burn between my legs where he took me to new heights while temporarily erasing the animosity between us. He wasn't wrong, we do have good chemistry, but it's a fragile chemistry that could explode in our faces at any given second.

I toss my dress over a chair and remove my still wet panties, dropping them into my clothes bin. I turn on the hot water in my small shower and step beneath it, letting the droplets wash away any trace of the man that momentarily broke down my defenses tonight. He may have been able to do it once, but he won't be able to do it again.

I get out of the shower and wrap a towel around my body as I do my nightly routine. I've been sleeping in the nude for years. I hate clothing on when I sleep. It feels binding.

I walk back into my room when something about what Conner said earlier makes me stop and frown. He said something about a quote in one of my articles. I walk to my computer and pull up what I submitted to my editor. It reads as I wrote it. Then, I look at the email that I got back from the editor. Also correct. It wasn't a front-page story, so I didn't save a copy. I stopped doing that after my first article was published. I'm not vain. It's just my work.

Out of total curiosity, I click on The Tribune's archive page. I type in my search and bite my lip as I wait for the article to appear, when it does, I click on it and begin to scroll down. That's when I see it...what the hell? He's not wrong, the article says

what he claimed it said. I scroll back up and read from the top down. It paints a horrible picture of his mother. Jesus, no wonder why he hates me. I'm so confused. This article is so different from what I wrote. Methodically, I start pulling up all my articles. I make myself a coffee and settle in for a long night. What else has been changed? And who is changing it?

Chapter9

Conner

I'm stewing over the events of last night. I prop my feet up on my desk and lean back. I fucking love my home office. The carved wood ceiling soothes me along with the classical music pumping through the hidden speakers in my shelves.

A knock on my door has me raising my head. Felicia pops her head in and grins. "Relaxing finally?" she asks.

I shrug. "Just thinking."

She opens the door a little more and props her hip against the doorframe. "Wow, this is a first. A woman has you thinking."

I glare at her. "I didn't say I was thinking about a woman."

"You didn't have to. Carry on, I'm all done here. I have to take my mom to chemo tomorrow, so I won't be here."

"How's Janet doing?" I ask, lowering my feet. I met Felicia because of her mother. Janet used to clean my father's house. He fired her after she let me eat a snack while home from college. Yes, my asshole father didn't want me eating his food. I hired her immediately to clean my apartment, and when she retired, I hired Felicia who decided

to take over her mother's business. She cleans homes for a few people on our street, but I keep her mostly to myself. She's excellent at keeping my social life organized and some things I don't want Pricilla to know about.

"She's doing OK. This round has been tough. She only has one more week."

"If she needs anything, anything at all, let me know," I state as I rise and walk over to her. I hug her, and she hugs me back. I let my guard down with her, but not too much. I don't hug many people, but Janet and Felicia are the exceptions when we're alone here in my home, away from prying eyes. Besides them and Aiden and Sebastian, only my pledge brothers know my truths and see the real me.

"You should stop by and visit her. She'd like that," Felicia says as she pulls away.

"I will. Things have just been...busy," I explain. It's a lame excuse since they live on my route home from the office, but it's not a lie that I've been preoccupied with things lately.

"Well, I'm sure she'd love to see you."

I nod and watch as she walks down the side hallway and out the back door. My phone buzzes and I reach into my pocket to check it.

Vivienne: I need to talk to you.

I should meet her at my office or better yet just call, but for some stupid-ass reason, I send her a response with my address since I doubt she memorized it on the drive over the other day, and tell her to come over here.

I go back to my office and try my father again. This time, I get no answer at all. I hate him more with each passing day. He can't hide from me forever. And he was the one

who last called me. It's always a fucking game with him. He'll make me track him down for weeks, just so I can have five precious minutes of his time.

I hear a buzz and I look up at the screen on my wall. The motion sensor video camera on my driveway has gone off, and I watch each camera on my property turn on as Vivienne drives up and parks her car. It's silver with a red leather interior that's as fiery as she is.

She's wearing tight pants and high heels that make her look four inches taller than she is. I grin, she's wearing a power outfit, how adorable.

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She presses the doorbell on my front door, and I turn on the speaker. “Come in,” I state as I unlock the door with a click of a button.

She hesitates for a moment and then proceeds to enter my house. I watch as she looks around, unsure of her next move. This little game is fun. It’s taking my mind off things I’d rather not be thinking about.

“Conner?” she calls out as she steps tentatively into my foyer and looks around. She allows herself to re-examine the giant chandelier and the double curving staircases that lead to a balcony upstairs. Several large paintings grace the white walls and the floors are my favorite, a checkered pattern of light and dark wood. She takes a moment to look at each painting.

“You’re warm,” I say into my house speaker after allowing her a moment to snoop. I try to fight the smirk threatening to emerge on my face as her head whips around and her face pinkens with guilt. I love that she knows that I’ve caught her investigating my things. I’m very pleased with myself for not giving her a full house tour last time. Why this little game is making me so happy is beyond me.

She sighs and takes another step toward her right.

“Colder,” I respond, propping my feet back up on my desk so I can enjoy the show.

She steps to the left. “Warmer,” I reply. I watch her open a door and realize it’s a closet. And then she turns to go down the hallway in front of her.

“Getting hot.” She starts opening doors as she walks, and I shout “cold” a few times.

Finally, she throws her hands in the air and spins around. I laugh at the look of frustration on her face. Yes, having her come here was well worth it.

“Conner, can we move past this game? I really do need to speak with you.”

She steps forward. She’s standing in front of the double doors of my office.

“You’re on fire,” I say, this time letting myself grin as she puts her hands on the doorknobs and throws open the doors.

She glares at me the second the doors are open. “For the love of God! Couldn’t you have just directed me here? Enough with the games,” she says tersely as she struts toward me, her high heels making a clickity-clack sound on my hardwoods and having a completely different effect on my own wood.

I adjust myself as I lower my feet and slide my chair back a bit. I motion for her to take a seat and she does, bringing one leg over the other.

“What’s up?”

She rolls her eyes. “This,” she says as she pulls some papers out of a bag and drops them on my desk.

I glance down to see news articles, written by her. “What? You finally realized you lack skills as an investigative journalist?”

“Ha. Ha. No, these aren’t my articles,” she states. I frown, confused by what she’s saying. “Well, they aren’t how I wrote them.”

“Don’t you have an editor?”

She nods again and pulls out a second pile of papers and drops those on my desk. “They aren’t how she edited them either. Someone else changed them before they went to print.”

“But...why would someone do that?” I ask, my frown deepening as I pick up matching files from the two piles and examine them more closely. She’s right, words are slightly changed and there’s an entire paragraph missing from one of them.

“Someone doesn’t want me reporting the truth on you or your fraternity brothers. It’s only articles about you all that have changes,” she says, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. “Any idea why that would be?”

Yes, I do, and no I’m not going to tell you, I think to myself.

“No idea,” I state as I drop the articles back to my desk. “Maybe a higher-up changes stuff before it goes to print?” I suggest. It’s bullshit, she knows, and I know it, but I won’t have her calling my bluff.

“Nope. No one should be doing that. I even asked my editor about it. She said the version I have in my email, should be what is printed.”

“Well, that’s quite the mystery, then. But why bother telling me that? And why don’t you read your printed articles?”

She stands and steps toward me, rifling through the two piles until she finds what she wants. Turning the papers around, she sets them down and pushes them toward me. I pause. It’s the article that I’d mentioned to her, the one about my family. The one where she all but called my mother a whore. I study the two and realize what she wrote was completely different than what was printed. Huge sections of her article are missing, giving a very one-sided view of my mom. It can’t be the work of the brotherhood, they’d never smear their own, not intentionally anyhow.

She blushes and looks down, following my gaze. “I never read the print copy. I...I just don’t.” She pauses and looks back up at me, but my gaze is fixed on those articles. “After you told me that...I went home and was confused. I pulled up the article and realized it didn’t look like the one I wrote. It started out the same. If someone had spot-checked it, they may not have even noticed. I only noticed because of the missing quotes. Then, I looked at another one and another one and found that only the ones about you and your brothers are altered. None of the others. And that is why I’m here. What are you not telling me?”

Chapter10

Vivienne

Conner’s usual poker face falters for a moment. I see a myriad of emotions play out over his face. Confusion. Realization. And finally, anger.

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He pounds a fist on his desk, and I jump. He doesn't say anything as he picks up his phone and makes a call. I don't know who he's speaking to, but he relays everything I just said and then hangs up.

"Who was that?"

"Sebastian."

"Congressman North? Why are you calling him?" I ask as I step away from his desk. For the first time since I've become well-acquainted with Conner Sterling, all of Conner Sterling, I'm scared. Why did I come here? He has a home-court advantage here. I'm fairly certain that's why he brought me here the other night. This house is everything I expected of Conner. It gives me zero new angles. I internally curse myself for having played right into his ploy. Conner, as it turns out, is a worthy opponent.

Conner sighs and runs a hand over his face. "We need to talk." His eyes search mine and I can see him, really see him for the first time. He's not the arrogant prick I thought he was, at least not right now.

I lower my shoulders, realizing that I'd bunched them up in my retreat from his desk. "OK," I reply slowly.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Vivienne," he says in a low rumbling voice that has chills running through my body, but no longer from fear. And why do I get the sneaking suspicion that he is going to hurt me, just not in the physical sense?

I release the breath I'm holding. "Fine. What do we need to talk about?"

"Follow me," he says as he opens the door and walks out of the room, holding it for me to pass over the door's threshold. I follow him to a bar in the corner of his kitchen. He pours himself a drink and reaches into a wine fridge to grab a bottle. He pours me a glass of wine, my favorite type of wine. He hands me the glass and motions for me to follow him. Frowning in confusion, I comply as we walk to a set of double doors that lead outside. He presses a button on the wall and a firepit turns on. Another press of a button, and classical music begins to play softly from outdoor speakers. I roll my eyes. His house is insane, and that's saying something considering where I was raised.

He sits down on a comfortable outdoor sofa and pats the seat next to him. "Sit," he commands. I give him a pointed look and he returns it. Rolling my eyes again, I comply, but only because my curiosity is killing me.

His voice is low when he speaks. "I don't trust that we aren't being listened to inside."

My hand pauses on its way to bring my glass to my lips. "Listening?"

He nods and scoots a little closer to me. I can feel the heat of his thigh against mine. Memories of our hate fuck at the hotel come tumbling back to me. I squeeze my legs together remembering how he felt slamming into me.

His gaze drops to my legs for a moment. I watch as his Adam's apple bobs on a swallow. There's no way he's affected by me, is there?

"Why do you report on us?" he asks as his arm comes up to the back of the sofa and he turns a little to face me.

I process his words. Us. He said “us.” “So, there is a brotherhood?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“My fraternity,” he clarifies, but something about the way he says that tells me that he isn’t unveiling the entire truth yet.

I nod and clear my throat as I run a finger along the seam of the cushion. I look to the flames in front of us, unsure how to begin. His hand gently grabs my thigh right above my knee and gives a squeeze. I give him a sideways glance.

“I know you won’t believe me yet, but you can trust me,” he assures me. Part of me wants to laugh because I don’t trust anyone. Yet, for reasons I can’t explain, I believe him when he says this, maybe I want to or maybe I’m letting my lady parts do my thinking. I watch his bicep flex through the thin fabric of his shirt. It’s a crime that this asshole has a body that apparently was carved out of stone by the gods of man's bodies.

I suddenly realize he’s watching me as I essentially undress him with my eyes. I blush and nod. “Just tell me what you need to tell me,” I finally manage to say although the words come out rushed and too high-pitched.

I watch the corners of his mouth twitch before he composes himself. “Tell me what you think is actually going on.”

I tilt my head to the side. “You already know. You clearly have read my investigation pieces.”

“I want to hear it from you,” he insists.

I let out a long breath and curl my legs up on the sofa next to me. The night air is cool, and as if sensing my needs, Conner reaches to the side of the sofa and pulls out

a blanket from a side cupboard. He lays it across my lap.

“Thank you,” I say softly. He nods and motions for me to continue. I consider my words carefully. I’m about to divulge information that I hadn’t intended on sharing with him. I have no idea why I suddenly have an irrational need for him to trust me. So I decide to tell him the truth, or at least a shortened version of it.

“I guess it started with my grandfather...” I trail off and search his eyes, but he gives nothing away. “When I was younger, I overheard a conversation. And it stuck with me. As I grew up, I realized that my grandfather won the presidency because of who he knew and not what he knew. While he did do some good things, he also did some bad things. I tried to stay out of the politics business as much as possible, but then when I came home from college wanting to change my major to journalism, my father basically lost his shit and said if I did that, I’d be disowned.” I pause. “So, you know how that turned out. My grandmother and my brother kept begging me to change it back to political science, but I refused. I wasn’t going to go to law school. I wasn’t going to be a Stepford wife. And so, I was on my own at the age of nineteen.”

“How did you survive? Did you get a job?” Conner asks as if he’s truly curious.

“I did, but to be honest, I had a professor who took pity on me. She let me live in an apartment above her family’s garage for free as long as I babysat her kids after school, and she also helped me navigate grants and scholarships. I wouldn’t have been able to stay in school if it wasn’t for her.”

“My mother would have called that tenacity,” he says with a small smile.

I return his grin with my own and shrug. “I suppose. Anyhow, I got a coveted internship at The Tribune and when it came time to graduate, I was hired as a local reporter. I think mostly they liked to put that I was a granddaughter of a former president in my bio on their website. I didn’t love that, but it got my foot in the

door, then so be it. I worked my way up slowly. And during that time, in secret, I started researching my grandfather's fraternity."

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“What did he say that you overheard?” he asks.

I bite my lip because I don’t know how much I want to share. Can I trust him?

“How old were you?” he asks. Now, this I can answer.

“I was sixteen,” I reply.

“And what did he say?” he asks again. I decide to share the truth. It might be the only way I find out if we are playing for the same team, or if I’ve made a horrible mistake.

“He said something about knowing what had happened. He said Todd knew and the council would speak. And because she didn’t die, they would need to take care of it...to protect their own? It was strange. It was the second time that I heard him speak of this guy named Todd. The first was when I was maybe ten. I was visiting him at the White House. It was Christmastime. And he was in the hallway, speaking to some man. The man said Todd would take care of it. And then started to say something else but stopped when he saw me. I thought that was a little strange, but not totally since it was the White House. It was stranger how my grandfather looked at me. He asked me later if I’d heard that conversation, and I just said no that I was thinking about a school project and hadn’t heard them. He seemed to believe me, but it was just weird because he’d never asked that before. It stuck with me. And then when I heard the other conversation, I got curious. I wanted to know who Todd was. And what was being ‘taken care of’ and so I started researching.”

I stop and stare at him. “You know,” I state because I see an understanding in his eyes.

He nods.

“You’re part of it,” I state.

He nods.

“It took me a long time, embarrassingly longer than it should have, to realize Todd wasn’t a person. TOD was Theta Omega Delta.”

He swallows. “What else did you figure out?”

“What my grandfather is part of...what I think you are a part of...is beyond TOD, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t speak.

“I know you must have taken a vow of some kind. TOD is a front. I bet not everyone in TOD is part of the brotherhood, now, are they?” I ask.

His eyes widen slightly.

“And then...there’s the council. But I’m not totally sure how the governing body of the brotherhood is set up. There might be brothers in a power position within the council,” I state, testing my theory.

His eyes widen further.

“How do I know?”

He nods slightly but doesn’t speak.

“Someone got careless,” I explain. “I was in the right place at the right time.”

I don’t want to give away my hiding spot. It’s a good one.

“So, what did you want to tell me?” I ask, letting him know that I haven’t forgotten why we are sitting out here.

“Sebastian, Aiden, and I...we think there are some shady things going down,” he explains cryptically. I give him a look that says I think there are always shady things going down around here. “More than usual,” he clarifies.

“Such as?”

“Is this off the record, Ms. Westerly?”

“Yes,” I say as I straighten my back and look at him anxiously waiting for information. I feel like my entire life has been spent waiting for whatever is about to be said.

“Confervo is somehow linked to the brotherhood, not just members, but to the organization itself.”

Now it’s my turn for my eyes to widen. “The pharmaceutical company?”

He nods. “We think they are bringing in an illegal drug and it’s being used on young women.”

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The wheels in my head begin spinning. “The girls in the park?”

“Yep.”

“But what does the brotherhood have to do with that?”

“We aren’t sure. But they sure as heck want Sebastian to take campaign money from them. And they don’t like us prying around about their former drugs that were in research and development and never made it to the FDA for approval.”

“Is Jared...a member?” I ask with a frown as I try to remember where he went to school.

“No. Not from our chapter, but he was a member of TOD at a different university. So he may be friends with members.”

I look back toward his home. “Why do you think your house is bugged?”

“Because my security system was hacked a few weeks ago,” he admits.

I look around us. Behind his house is a pool house and then out in the woods is another building. “What’s that?” I ask, pointing.

He stands and holds out his hand to me. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

Conner

She takes my hand. I can tell she's apprehensive. She should be.

"It's safe," I state as I lead her past some grass and shrubbery into the woods on my property. The small guesthouse is really just a project for me. It's an off-the-grid tiny home. There is only power from a small solar panel. The water is from a rain tank. The toilet is composting. I can even hitch this to a truck and pull it. It started out as a drunken bet with Aiden. Aiden loves restoring old cars. Something about being able to fix them that he finds oddly soothing. Anyhow, he showed me this video online and I said I could totally do that, and he bet me ten thousand dollars that I couldn't. It took four months of working every weekend and many evenings, but I did it.

I've never once brought a woman out here. Hell, I seldom come out here anymore. Just when I need to unplug for a night. I could sell it, but I don't have the heart. Sebastian once suggested that I buy some beach property and park it there. But for now, it acts as a little sanctuary away from my fortress.

I turn on the light once I unlock the door with a punch code. I watch Vivienne as she turns in a circle, taking it all in.

It's nothing special. A small bathroom, living area, kitchen, and a sizable loft space with a king-size bed. She runs a finger over the rough-edge oak countertops.

"It's my tiny home," I explain as I motion around us. "I built it."

I watch the look of shock spread across her face. "You? Built this?" she asks, pointing to my chest.

"I know, it's shocking. But I've been told that I'm very good with my hands," I state with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes. Normally, I'd find such behavior abhorrent, but with Vivienne, I find it oddly attractive. She's feisty and opinionated and not afraid to ask a question. She's also beautiful. She has to know how beautiful she is, yet she doesn't openly flaunt it.

She's nothing like what I thought she would be. And the fact that she didn't write the article I read, well, not entirely anyhow, makes my hatred for her transcend into something else. I want her. This whole time, our entire cat and mouse game, I've wanted her. Even after I had her at the hotel, it wasn't enough, I wanted more. I was like a junkie that had just one hit, yet it wasn't enough to satisfy my needs.

"Why didn't you just bring me out here to talk?" she asks as she climbs the steps and inspects the loft. I follow behind her.

"I thought you might be more comfortable out in the open," I confess.

She turns and looks down at me. "You're scary, you do know that, right?"

I laugh, and she smiles sheepishly.

"I don't try to be scary."

This time she laughs. "Oh, right."

"What? I don't."

She shakes her head a little. "I think you like being scary. I think you like people perceiving you as the opposite of what you are."

Her words cut a little too close to home.

“I like respect,” I admit.

“Do you think that I don’t respect you?” she asks as she climbs onto my bed and sits with her legs dangling off the side into the small hallway area that allows me to stand alongside my bed.

I step in front of her, arranging her legs on either side of my body. I lean down, placing my hands on the bed so that we are nose to nose.

“I think that you misunderstand me.”

She swallows. “Then help me understand.”

“Maybe I should just show you,” I state as I bring my hands to her hips and drag her body closer to the edge of the bed.

“I—I thought we said we weren’t going to do this again,” she stammers. But I watch as her eyes dilate and her tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip. She wants this.

“Then say no,” I command. “Say no and I’ll walk you back to your car and we can pretend like this never happened.”

“What if I don’t want to say no?” she whispers.

I take her hands in mine and slowly lean her back until she’s flush with the bed and

her hands are above her head. My body leans over her smaller one. I look down at her breasts, the tops showing above the plunging neckline of her shirt.

“Then, don’t,” I murmur. “But if you stay, we are doing this.”

She doesn’t say no as I slowly unbutton her pants, sliding them and her panties down her legs, and removing her shoes. I dispose of my own and begin unbuttoning my shirt.

She removes her hands from above her head.

I tsk and motion for her to return them to where I placed them.

“Has anyone told you that you’re very bossy?”

I grin. “No. Please tell me how I’m bossy?” I say in a mocking tone.

She huffs but stays in place. After removing my shirt, I look down at her, trying to decide how I want her as I slowly pull her top off exposing everything but her breasts that remain concealed by her bra.

I climb onto the bed and lie down perpendicular to her. She pulls her legs up to allow me space.

“Sit on my face,” I growl as I yank her toward me.

“I—I...” she stammers. I give her a look, and slowly she complies.

Her beautiful pussy hovers above my face and I grin as I run my finger through her folds, her legs quiver. She hesitates to sit down.

“You won’t hurt me. And besides, there’s nowhere I’d rather die than right here, with my tongue plunging into you. So. Sit. The. Fuck. Down. NOW!” I command as I take her hips and force her down, my tongue sliding inside her as she finally relaxes and does as I demand.

Heaven. This is what it must feel like because right now, all of my senses are completely engulfed by Vivienne. I taste her salty essence. I can smell her lavender body cream. I feel her inner muscles trembling around my tongue. I see nothing but her pretty pussy. And all I hear is her ragged voice crying out my name. Yes, most definitely heaven.

I drag her pliant body down from my face, bringing her to sit on my lap as I lean up and take a nipple in my mouth. I could never tire of her body. Her curves are perfection. I lose myself in the feel and taste of her skin against my tongue. She starts grinding against my cock which strains to be inside her. With each motion, I feel the head of it lodge at her opening.

“I don’t have...” I trail off as I lean against the polished wood headboard behind me while she continues grinding on my lap, my cock sliding between her wet folds.

She puts a single finger on my lips. “I have an IUD.”

She pauses her rolling hips, and we lock eyes. “Can I trust you?” she questions. I know she’s asking if I’m clean, but the question cuts so much deeper. I suddenly feel exposed, and I don’t like that at all.

I push down the feelings of the scared little boy that I once was and grab her hips. “Trust this, my little curious cat, my body is my temple and I take the utmost care of it,” I assure her as I bring her down on my cock one delicious inch at a time. I don’t bother asking her the same, because if she’s asking me, then she clearly cares about her own health enough to stay protected.

Feeling her bare skin against mine, the smooth, wet, velvety softness of her squeezing my cock, is almost more than I can bear. I bring my knees up and she leans back against them and closes her eyes as her lips part. She looks like a fucking sex goddess. She lets out a long breath when I thrust into her.

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She begins to move against me, and I bring my hands up to her breasts, cupping them as she rides me. I'm giving her a little control because it's turning me the fuck on and watching her breasts bounce in my hands is as mesmerizing as watching a pendulum swing.

She reaches above me and grabs a small wooden shelf I have above the headboard. As she leans forward, I feel myself slide deeper. We both groan at the feeling of my cock buried to the hilt inside her, and then our movements begin to speed up as we both reach for our release. I make sure she has hers before I allow myself to go. Feeling my cock coating the inside of her is primal. She leans against me, wrapping her arms around my neck and allowing me to bury my face between her breasts. It's nearly as nice as having her fine pussy on my face.

She lets out a giggle, and I look up at her.

"Something funny?"

"You called me a curious cat?" she says with a grin. I can't help grinning back at her.

"You are," I tease as I tickle her. She laughs and tries to get away, but I'm stronger, faster, and larger. I flip us over and pin her on the bed.

"You know curiosity killed the cat, right?" she says after catching her breath. I run my nose down her jaw.

"It's a good thing you have nine lives, then."

I kiss her neck and then her breast. I already feel my cock coming back to life. I look down at her aquamarine eyes that look like a reef on a perfectly sunny day. “I hope you don’t need your beauty sleep because tonight is going to be very long,” I declare as I slowly sink back inside my new favorite place.

Chapter12

Vivienne

I runmy fingers over the tattoo on his chest, following it down to his side. I frown as I feel raised skin beneath it. A scar. How have I not felt this before?

I feel him tense slightly and then his hand is on mine, drawing it to his lips and placing a kiss on it. I look up to find him intently watching me. He doesn’t say anything. I swallow because if he’s unwilling to discuss it, then whatever caused that scar must be bad, very bad.

“So, I guess this means we aren’t mortal enemies any longer,” I muse.

He pulls me up so we’re nose to nose. “I guess we’ll have to channel our anger in other ways,” he says with a wink.

I laugh. “Any ideas on how to do that?”

He smirks, and I roll my eyes as he plants a kiss on my lips. When he pulls back, my stomach growls, and he looks down at it.

“I think I should feed you before you turn into a Gremlin,” he teases.

“What time is it?” I inquire as I look around for a clock but don’t find one. He reaches over the side of the bed and finds his phone.

“Three in the morning.”

“Is it odd that I’m not tired?”

He shakes his head. “Me either. Must be all the endorphins.” He rolls us over and stands up, pulling his clothes back on and handing me mine.

“What about that one?” I ask as I point to his arm. There’s a tattoo of a nine-headed snake-like creature.

“Hydra,” he answers.

“Why a mythological creature?” I inquire as I run my finger over the tattoo. I feel a few faint scars beneath it.

“We all have them. Because if you cut off one head, two more grow in its place. It’s symbolic of the never-ending power of the brotherhood. It covers...” He trails off and clenches his jaw.

“It covers, what?” I prod, trying to feel the scar. He places his hand over mine.

“It’s part of membership...a branding of sorts.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You...were branded?”

He nods. “With the letters for TOD.”

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I feel it then, the outline of the letters. I pull my finger away almost as if the branding will burn me, but he grabs my hand and places a kiss on the tips of my index and middle finger.

“Come on, I’ll make you pancakes.”

I look up at him as I reach for my shirt. “You’re making pancakes?”

“What? I’m offended! I am capable of cooking,” he says with a cute pouty lip.

I lean up and kiss him. “How are you so full of surprises?”

He laughs against my lips. “I’m beginning to think you really are a bad investigative journalist.”

I swat his ass. “Not funny.”

“It’s a little funny, my curious cat.”

I glare at him. “Not funny.”

He shrugs as a giant grin spreads across his face transforming him from the scary beast to something quite the opposite of that. He holds out a hand to me and I take it as he leads me down the narrow stairs.

He rummages in the small kitchen for supplies. “Out here?” I ask.

He nods. “Of course, the kitchen works. The burner is propane,” he says as he turns it on and sets a cast-iron skillet over it. He whips up the batter in under a minute.

I sit at one of the two chairs along a breakfast bar and watch him cook. I find it interesting that he has a mansion mere feet away, but instead of going there, he chooses to remain in this small house that can’t be more than four hundred square feet.

His shirt is still unbuttoned, so every time he turns, I’m treated to a peek at his abdominal muscles. Placing my elbow on the counter, I prop my head in my hand and watch my own private cooking show. Conner flips the pancakes without a spatula and catches it back in the pan.

How have I studied these men for so many years and yet it’s like I don’t know them at all? Conner Sterling is a total mystery. His public persona might as well be that of a lion, yet here in his tiny home, he’s like a lamb.

Was I blinded by a false hatred of him? I’m left questioning everything about myself and what I believe. I thought I was smart. I thought I could see through all the bullshit in this godforsaken city, yet, I couldn’t have been more wrong about this man.

Is he scary? Yeah, a little. I certainly wouldn’t cross him. Is he a giant dumb oaf? Nope. Not even close. Is he still keeping secrets from me? Abso-fucking-lutely. I sigh. There’s a lot more to unpack here. I’ve just uncovered the tip of the iceberg.

“Here you go, lovely,” he says to me as he plates a pancake and hands it to me with a little flourish as though presenting a five-star meal to a queen. I laugh as I accept the plate and pour some of the piping hot syrup he has set on the counter over my pancake. My pancake is shaped like a cat.

“A cat?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. “A kitty for my curious cat,” he states as he pulls away and sets to work on his own breakfast. “There’s coffee over there. Take your pick,” he says, motioning to a one-cup coffee maker in the corner. I hop off my stool and choose a flavor, popping the cup into the machine. It only takes a minute before my steaming hot coffee is ready.

I sit down and taste my pancake. “Delicious,” I declare.

He smiles and pops in a coffee cup for himself while he plates his pancake.

“No shape for you?” I ask as I point to his blasé round pancake.

He winks at me. “Only guests get the very best.”

I shake my head and chuckle. I take a bite of pancake and a drop of syrup gets on my chin. I go to wipe it away with my finger, but Conner beats me to it as he leans in and licks the spot.

“I didn’t think I could like syrup on anything other than pancakes,” he muses as he licks his lips. “But I stand corrected.”

I blush. The man has me blushing. What the hell?

“We should get cleaned up,” he states as he takes the last bite of his pancake and motions to my plate. I nod that I’m done, and he goes about cleaning and putting the dishes away. I offer to dry the plates, but he merely points toward the small bathroom and tells me the shower is free.

I laugh and walk inside, sliding the barn door shut. The bathroom is small, but not nearly as small as one would expect. It even has a closet with a stacked washer and dryer. The floors must be heated because when I flip on the switch, I feel the warmth

radiating from them. The man has thought of everything. I'm not sure why that surprises me. I shouldn't be surprised at all, yet I keep finding new and interesting things about Conner Sterling. He might just have a soft center beneath that hard shell of an exterior.

I contemplate that as I get under the shower spray. The shower is large, which makes sense since its normal inhabitant is like a real-life giant.

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When I'm clean, I step out and take a soft, warm fluffy towel off a heated drying rack. "Nice touch," I murmur to myself wondering if he had thought of it or borrowed the idea from a designer.

Once I'm back in my day-old clothes, I head out to join him. I'm surprised to find he's also clean.

I look around in confusion and he laughs as he points to the back end of the tiny house. "I have an outdoor shower as well."

"Oh," is all I manage to say.

He looks at my clothes. "Sorry, I should have offered you something to change into."

I raise an eyebrow as I survey him from top to bottom. "I hardly think your clothing would fit me."

"I guess now is a bad time to inform you that if we were at my penthouse, I'd have clothing in your size?" he says with a smirk.

My mouth falls open because I assume he means his harem of one-night stands has left clothing there.

His smirk only gets broader as I try to process this information.

"Being a male whore is hardly something to be proud of," I scoff.

His eyes twinkle with mirth.

“What?” I throw my hands up in the air.

“No, please, continue,” he says, motioning with his hand for me to keep talking. I narrow my eyes. Shit. What is he not saying? I hate that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man is about to one-up me.

I put my hands on my hips. “Fine, why do you have women’s clothing at your penthouse?”

He leans down and gives me a sweet smile. “Because as a ‘male whore,’ I like my lady friends to have a change of clothing for when they unexpectedly spend the night. So, I keep workout clothes in a variety of sizes for my lady friends.”

“Oh,” I reply because that wasn’t exactly the answer that I anticipated.

“But...uh,” He runs a hand through his hair as he looks around. “I don’t keep clothing here because...” He pauses with his hand still in his hair.

“Because?” I urge.

“You’re the only woman I’ve brought out here.”

I wave my hands at our surroundings. “To your tiny house?”

“Nope, to this property,” he corrects. I feel my mouth open in a surprised “O” as I stare up at him. “Women have been here for parties, but not for...” He trails off and I swear the man is blushing, but he’s dimmed the lights in here and it’s hard to tell.

I roll my eyes. “Well, in either case, I have on clothes. I should probably head home.”

My phone pings in my pocket and I pull it out, surprised to see a text from none other than Jared Pallin.

Jared: How about a dinner meeting tomorrow?

I can tell by how his body tenses that Conner has read the message, too.

I begin to type a reply of “yes” when Conner grabs my phone.

“What the hell?”

“I don’t like the idea of you going to meet him alone,” he states as he holds my phone out of my reach.

I groan. “First, this is my job. Do you seriously think I can’t take care of myself? And two, how else am I going to get this information? We”—I motion between us—“need me to meet with him.”

“I. Don’t. Like. It,” he states as his jaw clenches.

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I throw my hands up in the air. “You are so irritating!”

“I’m not irritating!” he growls.

“Oh, fine, you are a control freak!” I exclaim.

He glares down at me. “Fine, then go on your dinner date. But so help me if he lays one finger on you.”

I roll my eyes as he hands me the phone. “Fine. I will,” I say like a petulant child, but I don’t care. This man is seriously giving me mood whiplash. One minute he’s all lovey-dovey and sweet and then the next he’s like some out-of-control ogre.

“I need to head home,” I mutter as I find my shoes and put them on before making my way to the door. Conner follows me out to his driveway.

“Call me after you meet with him,” he mutters as he opens my car door for me.

I stare into his eyes confounded by how much of a walking oxymoron he is...or maybe he’s just a moron.

“Better yet, call me when you leave and again when you get home,” he states.

“Has anyone ever told you how much of a control freak you are?” I ask as I bat my eyelashes at him in my best fake sweet-girl face that I can make.

He runs a hand down his face. “Has anyone ever told you that you are a pain in the

ass?”

I grin as I sit down and buckle myself in, grabbing the door from him, but before closing it, I look up at him. “Just you, but I suppose understanding me does require a certain IQ prerequisite.” I shut the door as he growls some response that I don’t catch. I turn on my car and pull away from him, watching him glare at me in my rearview mirror.

Vivienne, one. Conner, zero.

Chapter13

Conner

After Bryce’s guys sweep my house again and double-check that the intercom and security system hasn’t been hacked, I call over Sebastian and Aiden. The security team was here the entire day. They found one tracking device on my McLaren, which explains our fun cops and robbers car game. I now have new security protocols at my penthouse, home, and office. I have a security detail assigned to me and I’ve urged Sebastian and Aiden to get their own. Sebastian is contemplating it. Aiden flat-out refused. He’s a stubborn fuck, that’s for sure.

I’ve barely eaten today. Even Felicia noted that I’m on edge.

I push around lettuce on a plate of salad that she made for me before she left for the day. I’ve tried texting Lena twice, and I’m still getting the cold shoulder. My father is busy. My father has a meeting. My father is in business negotiations. I sigh as I set my phone down on the counter.

My side door beeps, and I look up to see Sebastian walking into my kitchen. Felicia, Janet, Sebastian, and Aiden are the only ones that have direct security access to my

home.

“What’s up?” he asks as he pours himself a drink and takes up his normal spot to my left at the breakfast bar.

“My father is conveniently busy,” I mutter as I rattle the ice in my glass.

“Typical. I can relate to that,” Sebastian states as he checks his phone.

“Lucy? I’m home!” Aiden calls out as he walks into the room.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” Sebastian asks.

“Did someone get pussy?” I tease.

He flicks us off and gets himself a drink. “Someone got a promotion.”

“No shit!” Sebastian says as he raises his glass. We clink our glasses together.

“Congrats,” I add.

“I get my own lab now. It’s great. I was worried when Harry left that they wouldn’t promote me, but I guess being who I am has its perks. I’m the youngest doctor to ever run the program.”

We all know that being who he is means being Dr. Derek Thomas’s son. Prestige is their family game. And they are very good at it.

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“Well, nonetheless, congrats,” Sebastian says.

“So, what exactly happened at the gala? You haven’t even filled us in since we spoke after the car chase,” Sebastian adds.

I had spent an entire day in discussions with Sebastian, Aiden, and Bryce about our security, the likelihood of a tracking device on my car, and then I had a completely different sidebar with Sebastian and Aiden about Vivienne and my thoughts on the possibility of my father’s company being involved in transporting the illegal drugs.

Sebastian had Alexis, who he had re-hired to work in his office, start researching to see if any shipping logs were submitted to the port authority. So far, Alexis hadn’t found anything.

“Well, Vivienne spoke to Jared as you know. She didn’t get any intel at the gala, but she is supposed to have dinner with him this week,” I grumble as I glaze over why she didn’t get intel. I take full responsibility for her sudden departure from the event, but my best friends don’t need to know everything.

As if reading between the lines, Sebastian raises an eyebrow. “Why do I feel like Vivienne is no longer an enemy of the state?”

I narrow my eyes at him. My brothers know me too well. “I’m not discussing it, but no, she’s no longer on my shit list. She’s on our team, and she can be trusted.”

“Noted,” he says with a little mirth in his tone. I know he wants to question my judgment, but our trust is the core of our friendship, so my assessment of Vivienne

will stand.

“Anyhow, we need to figure out when Jared’s next shipment is arriving. If your intel is correct, Aiden, then this stuff is probably in refrigerated containers. There are literally hundreds of them there. It’s beyond a needle in a haystack. If we can get a date of when they arrive or when they shipped, then it’s feasible that we can find them.”

Aiden’s eyes widen. “You are going to break into your father’s shipyard, and loot through containers. All in hopes of finding a few containing an illegal substance that you may or may not be able to verify as being an illegal substance?”

I raise a hand to stop him from talking because his logic is giving me a headache.

“Do you have a better plan?”

He cracks his knuckles and purses his lips. It’s his telltale sign of deep thought.

“If I was there with you, then perhaps...maybe, I could run a quick on-site analysis. I don’t like this plan though. It has way too many possible points of weakness.”

“By all means, please come up with something more concrete and secure,” I state dryly.

“I’ll think about it. What about all the other connections? If we’re taking down the entire ship, then we need more than some illegal drugs.”

Sebastian nods. “I know. I’m working on it. Bryce has a friend who knows a hacker that may be able to pull emails, text messages, and the like along with anything they’ve hidden on the dark web.”

“We’ll need all that evidence if we take anything public,” I state.

“I know. It’ll take time, a few weeks,” he adds.

“Should we talk to Chuck?” I ask, mentioning the one mentor from the brotherhood that we trust, especially Aiden. Sebastian’s mentor was a former president who passed away two years ago from cancer. My mentor is an irritating, former professor who now makes the rounds on talk shows. I seldom speak with him.

“No, not yet,” he replies.

We silently exchange looks. We’re all well aware that this could likely end our careers. It might very well end everything as we know it. I’ve been spending too much time thinking about that lately. And I’ve started working to arrange an exit plan for us. I just haven’t shared that with them yet. They’ll learn about it all in due time.

“I need to go. I have an early meeting tomorrow,” I announce as I grab a glass and fill it with water.

“Whoa! I thought we were hanging out. We have plans to make and an empire to crush,” Sebastian says.

“We do. And that plan involves intel, does it not?” I ask as I down my water and set the cup in the sink.

Sebastian and Aiden pause, waiting for me to explain myself.

“If my father won’t come to me, then I guess I’m going to him.”

Aiden’s eyes widen. “Damn, someone grew some massive balls this week.”

“First, we both know I have massive balls. And second, I’m tired of Lena giving me the runaround.”

Sebastian is still quiet, and we both look at him.

“What?” Aiden asks.

“Alexis...she’s remembering more, about that day.”

“Such as?” I inquire.

“She thinks there were at least four men in the room. But she said one was on the phone and his voice was altered. She couldn’t tell who he was.”

“Does she remember what they said?” Aiden questions.

Sebastian shakes his head. “No.”

“I could hypnotize her,” he suggests.

Sebastian glares at him. “I don’t think so.”

Aiden throws his hands in the air. “Just saying, it’s one way to help her unlock those memories.”

I fight a smirk as Sebastian gives Aiden a look that says no one is making his woman unconscious except him.

“OK, I’m off. Feel free to stay.”

“Don’t kill him yet,” Sebastian half teases.

I shake my head as I head to my garage. I wave to the security guy and let him know my plans. He leaves another man at my house and follows me. I hate having these guys up my ass. I don't completely trust them, hell, I don't trust anyone one hundred percent. I'm sure Aiden could hypnotize me and unlock enough core memories to have me locked up in a psychiatric ward for life. Theo Sterling is a monster, and no one knows that better than I do.

I put on my favorite indie band as I drive, attempting to numb my scattered thoughts. But instead, it just reminds me of Vivienne.

I press call on my steering wheel and she picks up on the second ring.

"A phone call? To what do I owe the honor?" she answers.

I grin. Such a sassy little cat.

"Meet me at my penthouse."

"What? No reach around first?"

I laugh at her crass statement. "Gorgeous, don't fuck with me. We both know that you know exactly where my penthouse is. So, I expect you there in thirty minutes." While she probably knew vaguely where my home was, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt she's aware of my penthouse because she mentioned that I kept a residence in the city in one of her many articles. I swear to God, if this woman's grandfather wasn't who he was, she would have been dead long ago. Part of me wonders if her altered articles aren't the work of her grandfather. She's a thorn in the brotherhood's side and keeping her safe is going to be a full-time fucking job for me.

I pull into the garage. The security guard stops and chats with who I assume is the guy stationed at this residence. I should learn their names, but I don't do that with

staff unless I know they are sticking around for a while and I'm hoping these guys won't be.

I take my private elevator up to my home. The sole reason I purchased it was because it has an amazing view of the Washington Monument. That, and I may have outbid my own father for this penthouse in one of the city's most exclusive apartment buildings. I smirk at that memory. He may have gotten some of my private assets temporarily frozen for a week afterward as his own special form of punishment. Asshole.

I press a button and alert the front desk security that I'm expecting a visitor and to send her up. I walk up to my rooftop deck and lean on the railing.

"Mr. Sterling, Mr. Gallagher advised that you may want to refrain from being outside while here. He cannot secure the area properly," a young man in a suit says from behind me. I roll my eyes.

"Well, tell Mr. Gallagher that I'll take my chances," I grumble as I lean on my railing and look out at the city, I've called home for as long as I can remember.

"Very well, sir," he says as he steps away and leaves me in peace.

It's not silent up here, I can still hear cars honking horns, the subtle roar of nearby traffic, and the occasional laughter or yelling of people walking down the street, but it's muffled and far away. I look at the monument in the distance and wonder if my forefathers were as fucked up as my actual father. The lies here are as deep as the Grand Canyon and as vast as the oceans. I've long tired of the games, yet I've stayed. Could I disappear? Yes. But my commitment to Sebastian and Aiden far exceeds any commitment to the brotherhood.

"Conner?" I hear her voice behind me.

I turn. She stands by the door, looking hesitant as though she's afraid she's interrupted me. I don't move, so she slowly walks over to join me, gazing out at the view.

“Wow. Impressive,” she says softly as she places her hands on the railing, our pinky fingers touching.

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“It is,” I agree. I turn and start back inside. “Come on.”

She follows me as I walk back down to the main level. I reach into my wine fridge and hold up her favorite bottle of wine.

“How do you know that?” she asks.

“Know what?” I ask, playing along. I know perfectly well what she’s asking but toying with her might be one of my very favorite new games.

She gives me a pointed look and motions with her chin to the bottle.

“I know you may find this hard to believe, but I’m actually pretty observant.”

She laughs. “Apparently, I’ve underestimated your abilities.”

I give her a wink as I open the bottle and pour her a glass. “I believe you have.”

She blushes a little as I hand her the glass before pouring myself one. I don’t usually drink white wines, but for her, I’ll make an exception.

“What did you want?” she asks.

I pause and consider my words. I don’t want her to know everything, partly because I’m still learning to trust her and partly because for some reason that I have yet to want to explore; I feel the primal need to protect her, and knowing what I know, would most certainly put her in harm’s way.

“Alexis believes there were more men in the room with her,” I say, testing how she reacts to this information.

She lowers her glass. “When she was kidnapped?”

I nod. “Yes.”

I see when her investigative journalist light turns on in that smart brain of hers. “Does she know how many? Did she recognize the voices? Could she recognize the voices? When did she remember this?” Her questions come out in a fluid, spitfire of sounds.

I hold up a hand. “Calm down there, curious cat. We don’t know yet. She thought perhaps a total of four men, and another one was on the phone and his voice had been altered. So, I’m not sure she’d even be able to recognize it if she heard it.”

“Oh.” She pauses, considering this additional information. “Why do you think the one on the phone had his voice altered?”

I shrug. “Now, that’s a good question.”

She sips her wine and leans back against my counter. “I mean...let’s just play this out, right? Your father, we know he was there. The other person in the room, she hasn’t recognized yet. One on the phone and we think a third or fourth in the room?”

I nod. “So why did they not all change their voices?”

“Because they wanted to send a message. And a message they sent.”

“Yes, but it still doesn’t add up.” She frowns as she drinks more.

“No, that part doesn’t add up, I agree.”

She's quiet as she drinks, and I wonder what she's thinking. When she speaks, I know she's thoroughly thought through the information I've given her.

"Your father wanted you to know. Specifically, you," she whispers. "But why?"

"A warning, likely to us to stay in line."

"I don't like this. Something major is missing and I think that whatever we aren't seeing yet, could be a game-changer," she states.

I don't disagree with her. She's right, about everything. This woman knows so much more than she's let on. It's at this moment that I know she's trustworthy. She's put herself in danger to find the truth because she thinks bad things are going on. And she's correct. Only now, I think it's clear the bad things could be a whole lot worse than any of us fathomed possible.

I watch as she looks over at a shelf in my living room. I see her survey the few family photos that I have put out in my home. Her face drops as she sees one in particular. That look on her face guts me. I hate pity, but this is more than pity. This is a concern, which is not something I'm used to seeing on other people's faces. I can read people well, but only because I've experienced more emotions than I should have. I've also locked all of those emotions away.

Broken. I've been broken for so long that I don't even know what it feels like to be whole, to be unscarred by life.

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“She was beautiful,” Vivienne says softly as she stares at the photo of my mother. She’s not wrong. My mother was gorgeous. She was like an angel, and when she died, she took every little bit of heaven with her, leaving me with a demon who was just as ugly as she was beautiful.

Vivienne turns to look at me. “You have her eyes.”

I pull her hand, causing her to turn toward me. “Enough.”

Reaching up, she touches my chest. “Why do you not want to talk about her? Is it too painful?”

“Why do you care?”

She pulls her hand back as though she’s touched a flame. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

I grip her hand and pull her back toward me, leaning down so our faces are mere inches apart. “I think we both know that you did mean to pry. My mother is off-limits. I will not discuss her, not with anyone.”

Vivienne swallows, her face flushing as she looks into my eyes. “OK. I won’t bring it up again.”

“Good,” I whisper. I release her hand. While I’m growing to trust her and I certainly don’t think she’s the two-faced reincarnation of Satan that I had previously suspected, my mother is still a sore point for me. Hell, she’d be a sore point even if Vivienne’s

name hadn't been on the byline of that article.

"W-what did you want?" she asks.

I reach out and slowly go to stroke the side of her face. I notice her slight flinch and I feel anger rising in me. When my thumb gently strokes her jawline, I feel her body relax slightly.

All of my irritation at the discussion about my mother evaporates as I look into her eyes and see a mixture of fear and relief. Someone's hurt her before, physically. How had I not noticed this previously?

I bring my other hand to her face and cup it.

"Who did this to you?" I ask, my voice low and menacing because whoever did this, I want to pummel. I only saw my father strike my mother once in a fit of rage. He thought she was cheating on him. He never again touched her in anger, and he spent months groveling at her feet, asking for forgiveness, which my mother gave him. She told me when I commented about it that my father was a bit of a beast and once in a long while he wasn't able to control the beast side of him, but she still loved him. I never understood that, at least not until I met Vivienne. She has a way of redirecting my anger and I'm not completely comfortable with that. But I, unlike my father, would never dare strike another human except in self-defense or to protect someone I love. I admit, in my younger years, I got in my fair share of fistfights after my mother's death. My third private academy made my father send me to therapy. Since I was out of prestigious school options, he complied begrudgingly. It was that therapist that over the next four years changed me, taught me to funnel my anger and aggression, and showed me that I was becoming a monster, just like my father.

Vivienne's eyes close.

“Answer me,” I demand giving her face a gentle shake. I can feel my jaw clenching as I wait for her response.

Those dark blue eyes open, a sheen of tears covering them. “It doesn’t matter,” she whispers.

“It matters to me,” I insist.

“There’s another reason that I didn’t go back home,” she says softly as she stares not at my eyes but my mouth as though it’s too intense to look at me properly. “When my father found out that I wasn’t going to...what were his words...stay the course; we got in a fight. He was drunk...and it got physical. Jeff, my brother, pulled him off me.” She takes a shuddering breath and I clench my jaw so hard I’m fairly certain I just broke my molars.

“Your father hit you?” I growl. She has no idea how close to home this hits me. Our pasts suddenly don’t seem so different.

She nods, a single tear escaping and running down her cheek onto my thumb. I pull her against me.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I kiss the top of her head. “I would never strike you, ever.” Because I know how that feels and I will never do that to a person I love. My mind pauses on the last word. Love. I can’t love Vivienne. I don’t love women, not in a relationship sense. But based on how I feel right now, I know that I would most definitely pummel someone’s ass for her.

“I would never hurt you,” I murmur against her hair.

She pulls her head back and wipes her tears away. “Wouldn’t you though?”

I'm taken aback by her words.

“Vivienne...I...” I trail off as I try to find the words to tell her that I would not harm her, ever.

“We both know that this”—she motions between us—“can't last forever.”

I look down at her, this time when I reach for her jaw, she doesn't flinch. I'm not entirely sure what motion I made activated her PTSD, but now I'm acutely aware of my movements.

“Then, let's make the most of the time we have,” I state because she's not wrong. She doesn't know the plan. She doesn't know what we are trying to do. And she certainly doesn't know about my exit plan.

Chapter14

Vivienne

I don't have time to answer as his lips crash against mine. And like a lightning bolt, the action flips a switch in me. I don't know what I need right now, but I know I want him.

I jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist as he catches me. Our lips are hungry, searching for relief, seeking to forget whatever haunts us.

I feel us moving as he walks us to what I presume is his bedroom. His mouth moves from mine and travels along my jaw and neckline. I feel one of his hands aggressively pulling at my top as I try to unbutton his shirt. He lets me slide down his body as we tug and rip the clothes away from our bodies. We can't get enough of each other. Our mouths suck and kiss, seeking what we need. His mouth is hot on my skin, leaving long trails of wetness. He takes a nipple in his mouth as he leans down. His strong hands clutch my waist.

I don't bother taking in the room as I grasp his head in my hands and pull his face back up to mine. I need reassurance for some reason. I need him to kiss me. It's as though he can read my mind. His lips immediately seek mine out as he pulls me against him, his hard erection wedged between us.

He starts walking us backward until I feel a bed against the back of my legs. His lips pull away from mine, and he twirls me around, bending me over the bed. I don't want a quick fuck, not like the hotel.

I start to squirm, and he presses a hand to the small of my back. "Be still, gorgeous,"

he commands. His voice is low and deep, echoing in the room. Normally, I'd never submit to a man's demands, but for reasons I don't want to consider, I relax against the mattress.

My reward is immediate as his hand reaches down between my legs and one long finger strokes between my folds. I release a shuddering breath as I push against his hand. I need more; I want more.

He keeps his motion constant, not increasing or decreasing his pressure. His fingers continue stroking so close to where I need him. He's driving me crazy.

Just when I feel like I'm going to lose my mind, he leans over and slowly slides his finger inside me. A moan escapes my lips.

His breath feels warm against the shell of my ear. "Good girls get rewarded," he whispers. I practically melt against him. Why? Under any other circumstance, some man saying that to me would have me seeing red, yet here I am ready to say, "yes, daddy." What the fuck is wrong with me?

My consternation and frustration with myself must be self-evident. He chuckles. "Let go, curious cat. Turn that big brain off and just feel. There's no wrong way to feel." He pauses as he adds a second finger inside me and curves them both, raking them down the front wall of my wet channel. I feel him move over a spot that has my toes curling. He bites down on my earlobe gently and runs his fingertips back over the spot. I shudder.

"I'm going to make you feel so much, you'll stop being able to think," he assures me with the confidence that I normally find irritating, but right now, I want more of it. His fingers increase in speed, moving fast and hard against the spot inside of me that he's located. I spread my legs, wanting more of it. Whatever he's doing, he needs to keep doing it.

“Relax,” he reminds me. I stop moving and am rewarded when he adds a third finger, stretching me, but he keeps his fingers moving over the spot as he brings his thumb up to my clit. He starts with circles and then swipes. Hard at first and then soft. I feel myself climbing, my body begins shaking. If I cared at this moment, I might find myself embarrassed by how my body is responding to his touch. The sound of his fingers covered in my wetness makes loud noises in the silent room. I’ve lost all sense of control. I just need to reach that pinnacle. He doesn’t stop. His pinky finger glides up between my ass crack, adding pressure against an area that is vastly uncharted territory for me. I give a little jerk at the surprise of it there, but he gives a soft “shhhh” in my ear. “Feel,” he urges.

I do, and that’s when I finally reach the summit. I cry out his name as I come. I’m at a loss for all other words. My body trembles and pulses. He doesn’t stop his motions until I go limp against the mattress.

He slowly withdraws his hand and helps to bring my legs up on the bed. He positions me so that I’m kneeling and then has me lower my ass and spread my thighs apart. I’m so exposed to him in this position, yet I don’t care. As soon as I recover from the orgasm, all I can think about is having another. I’m an addict, and Conner is my dealer.

He takes his cock in his hand and runs it through my folds. I look between my legs and see it glistening from my wetness. Holy fuck, why is this so freaking hot?

I’ve had sex plenty of times. I’m no shy virgin. But I’d say my sex has been pretty boring, pretty vanilla. For someone in their late twenties, I haven’t really explored much in the bedroom.

He keeps moving his erection over my wetness, lodging the tip in my entrance and pulling it back, over and over. It makes a sound of slapping liquid each time he pulls away. I look down and watch. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen, and I can’t

even see it all happening from my vantage point. I look over my shoulder at Conner. His eyes are glued on where our two bodies are nearly joined. He can most definitely see everything and something about that makes me want him even more. I push back a little, seeking more friction, wanting to take him inside me.

He takes a hand from my hip and places it on my ass cheeks, preventing me from moving as he dips his thumb back into my crack finding the puckered opening he discovered earlier. That has me stopping.

“No one has played with you here before?” he asks as he continues his slow and steady motions.

I shake my head, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed, Vivienne. I want to bring you pleasure, and I think this pleases you,” he says as he runs his thumb down a little farther and then brings it back up. He’s covered it in my wetness, and his finger glides over the opening with ease. He presses slightly. I’m not sure if I like it, but I don’t have time to consider it as he thrusts inside me with his cock, taking all my attention away from my ass.

I groan at the sudden wanted intrusion.

“Fuck, you are so wet,” he murmurs as he begins to move, his other hand holding my hip tightly, guiding my body back and forth at the pace he’s setting. His thumb presses a little more and I feel it inside me. It’s a strange feeling, I feel full, between his cock and his thumb. He doesn’t force it, just gently keeps pressing and then slowly pulls back and presses again. I have no idea how he’s moving his thumb and cock at different paces, but he is and it’s driving me crazy.

“Touch yourself,” he grunts as he keeps up his movement.

I reach between my legs and begin mimicking what his fingers did earlier. It doesn't feel nearly as good as his.

"I need..." I trail off, unsure of what I need.

"Tell me what you need," he commands.

"You," I whisper.

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I feel his hand come off my hip and reach around my thigh, seeking my clit. He grabs my hand again, and just as we did the other day, he interlocks our fingers and moves them over my clit. I don't know how he's doing all of this. I don't want to know. I want it to be like magic.

"Let go," he says.

He moves his hips, and his cock hits a new angle inside of me. I explode without another thought. The scream from my lips is involuntary. I can feel all my inner muscles clamp down on him as I come with such force that liquid gushes out of me, running down his length.

"Fuck! Yeah!" he calls out as his thrusts become faster. I feel him swell inside me once more. I know he's about to come, and I clamp my muscles intentionally once more. His body jerks, and he grunts as I feel him spill inside of me.

He keeps moving for a few moments, jerking once or twice more. And then slowly, he pulls free of me. I feel so empty. He walks away and I lift my head as I watch him enter what looks to be a bathroom. I hear water run and a moment later he's back with a dampened towel.

He gently cleans me and tosses the towel on the floor.

His hands come up to my waist and he helps me move up the bed, slowly flipping me over so that I'm greeted by his gorgeous eyes.

"Welcome back," he says with a chuckle. I roll my eyes and I grin, stretching my

arms above my body. His eyes follow the length of my torso, and he leans over, pressing a gentle kiss on the top of my breast.

“You are so fucking addictive,” he murmurs while running a finger down my belly.

My grin dissipates on a long content sigh as he draws a circle around my belly button and slowly starts to work his way down to the apex of my thighs. I can feel his erection springing back to life against my side. This man is a sex monster in the best way possible.

He takes his time slowly exploring my folds. His touch is light, yet purposed as though he’s mapping my most sensitive areas, exploring every uncharted territory with careful precise movements while cataloging each of my whimpers and moans.

My eyes are closed, yet I can still feel him watching me. I force myself to open my eyes. He’s lying next to me, his elbow bent, his head propped up on his hand that’s not enrapturing me. His eyes are fixed on mine.

Something about the way he looks at me is magnetizing. I should look away, close my eyes again, but I can’t. I keep focused on him as I feel myself growing wetter and needier by the second.

“I need you,” I finally whisper.

He doesn’t look away as he leans over me and kisses my lips and then my neck. He leaves another trail of kisses down my breasts and belly before pushing my thighs farther apart and settling himself between them. I feel myself blush a little as he glances down at my most intimate parts, trailing his finger along the sensitive inner skin.

“You’re beautiful...everywhere,” he whispers as he leans forward, his eyes now on

mine. He slowly licks me. I can't look away. I watch him with fascination as he devours me. His fingers continue to stroke me inside and out. Every time I feel close, he pulls back and starts again.

"Please," I beg. I need this. I've never known my need for an orgasm to be this strong. I partly hate the control I'm losing, but I also know how good the ride will be once I allow myself to fall.

He smirks and blows against my clit. The hot air tickles and teases me.

"Conner," I grumble.

His smirk intensifies as he leans forward and latches on to my clit, flicking it with his tongue as he slides his fingers back inside me. I try to keep my eyes open, but I can't. My eyelids lose the fight to stay open as I cry out incoherently and feel myself spasming around his fingers.

When I open them again, I find him licking his lips, which glisten with the remains of my orgasm.

He lays one final kiss on my clit, and I shudder.

Slowly, he crawls up my body. His hard length is nestled against my center, ready to push inside, but he doesn't. I search his eyes as I spread my legs farther apart, inviting him inside me.

It looks as though he's about to say something, but then changes his mind and crashes his lips against mine. I taste myself on his tongue and moan as he thrusts inside me in one long languid, toe-curling motion.

"Fuck, I could get lost in you for days," he whispers so quietly I wonder if he knows

he said it out loud. We watch each other as he moves over me. I want more of him; I need more of him. I bring my knees up. He doesn't miss a beat as he hooks his arms under them and folds me in half, pressing my thighs against my body in a motion that stretches me and allows him to go deeper. A delicious friction begins as he does all the work. I'm essentially sandwiched in a tucked-up ball, my feet having no leverage, my knees up by my breasts. Thank God for yoga class.

His pelvis grinds against my clit with each movement, his cock hits the perfect spot inside me as he slides in and out, and before I know it, we're both coming. Our bodies setting off a chain reaction in the other's.

When he finally stops moving, he pulls out and gently guides my legs down.

"Come on, let's grab a shower," he states as he stands and holds out his hand to help me up, which is greatly appreciated because that crazy yoga move did nothing for my nerves in my feet, which are now nearly numb, but I don't give a shit because I feel so good right now.

He assists me to stand before he gives up on my abilities to walk and picks me up.

I laugh and slap his chest. "I can walk, silly."

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He grins down at me and kisses my lips. “Maybe I like you right here,” he admits as he walks us into his bathroom and sets me on a cedar stool by the enormous walk-in shower. His words are unexpected, tender, and so unlike him that I can’t even process the meaning, not now. Right now, I just want to enjoy feeling this endorphin high. He presses some buttons by the shower, and everything turns on in a similar motion to his house, yet not nearly as extravagant. This man’s homes are extra.

Once he’s pleased with the water temperature, which, by the way, means his shower beeps at him and displays that the water is ninety-two degrees. He motions for me to get under the rainfall showerhead. I sigh as I feel the perfect pressure of the water falling over me.

“You’re spoiling me,” I say on a moan as I run my hands through my wet hair. “A girl could get used to this.”

He stands in front of me, his eyes intense. “I don’t see any girls here,” he whispers in a gravelly voice. If I had on panties, they would be melted by both his words and his dark gaze. “And,” he adds as he holds a hand under what looks like a soap dispenser and then starts lathering it on my breasts, “maybe I like spoiling you...just a little,” he says with a wink.

I grin and decide I need to bank this memory in my happy memory file for later when this ends and I want to look back fondly on whatever the hell this is between us. Because just as he can be a giant dick, he can turn around and be this doting, caring, deeply sexy man. He is the definition of yin and yang. I just hope I don’t get too much whiplash from being around him.

I grab some soap and begin to return the favor. My hand glides over the ragged scar on his side. He pulls away slightly, and I pause. His words from earlier come back to me about how we had more in common than he wanted to admit. His father. Did his father do this to him?

I look up at him. He's watching me cautiously. I feel like we have an entire conversation without speaking until I finally decide to ask him. I don't want any more secrets between us.

Chapter 15

Conner

"What did he do to you?" she asks. Only this time, I don't feel like it's reporter Vivienne asking. This time, she wants to know, and that changes things. I hadn't planned on telling her anything. But the way she's watching me and after what she shared with me, maybe it's quid pro quo or maybe I trust her just enough to let my demons show, but either way, I find myself deciding not to lie, not to tell the story I have told so many others. It wasn't a car accident. It wasn't an accident at all. I take a deep breath and exhale as I let her finger trace the scar beneath my tattoo. The tattoo I got one year after he did that to me.

"My father came from a broken home. His father was a drunk. His mother was a druggie. He was raised by the streets. He started gambling as a teenager. He did well, made a name for himself. When his mother couldn't pay her debt to her drug dealer, he took my father as collateral. Only, his boss took a liking to my dad. He raised him through his teenage years. Became his legal guardian. Forced him to straighten himself out and go to college. He sent him to the States because he didn't want him in England. The drug boss had a shipping company. It was his front, his legal way to be part of the upper class. It was a decent size, but it was my father who after getting his degree took it to the next level. I think the brotherhood liked that my dad had

connections to the underworld. He was a wildcard choice for them, but clearly, it paid off.” I pause, assessing her reaction. She doesn’t seem phased. I don’t know if that’s because she’s researched my past or if she hears so many crazy stories in her line of work that one more isn’t going to crack her veneer. Clearing my throat, I continue.

“My father wanted me to take the helm after I graduated, but I liked other things about D.C. I liked the politics. So, I explained how I could help the company by representing them and getting laws changed. He wasn’t having it. But Dad’s friends, who owned another shipping company, overheard us talking and offered to give me capital to start my lobbying firm. I took it, leased an office, hired two staff members, and the rest is history.”

“What did your dad do when he found out?”

I grin. Not because it’s a happy memory, but because that motherfucker got what he deserved that day. “He punched me. Broke my nose.”

Vivienne’s eyes go wide even though I can tell she’s fighting her reaction.

“Don’t worry,” I say as I lean over and kiss her lips. “I fractured his eye socket. And now every time he looks in the mirror, there’s a scar there, reminding him of the day his grown-ass son finally stood up for himself.”

“He gave you that scar, didn’t he?” Vivienne whispers as she points to the scar on my side.

I nod. “He caught me for the second time, trying to get into a box of my mother’s belongings. He whipped a knife out of a holster on his leg and slashed my side. He said I had two choices. I could stay and follow his orders and he’d pay for my college. Or I could leave and never come back. But if I left, I’d be dead to him, and I would never see anything of my mother’s, ever again. I lunged, he sliced my side and

told me that was my one and only lesson.”

“But why? Why would he do that?” Vivienne asks. Her eyes are wide. She’s shocked. Here I thought the great Vivienne Westerly was unshockable.

I snort on a laugh. “Because the man is fucking insane. The only thing that kept him from going off his rocker was my mother, and when she died...he lost his shit. And he never got it back.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly as she pulls her hand away from my side and reaches up to stroke my jaw. “I’m sorry the one person you should have trusted would hurt you like this.”

I know she understands that statement more than she should, and it brings a rage up inside me again. Sensing it, she strokes my cheek gently. She bends at the waist and leans toward my scar and kisses it before standing straight again.

I cup her face in my hands and kiss her. I try to kiss away all our fears, our trust issues, the pain our fathers caused us. For a moment, we are just two people sharing our common tragedies, linked by a past that shouldn’t have happened.

When I pull back, there are tears in her eyes. I wipe them away with my thumbs. “No tears. We will give them no more tears,” I state.

She nods and reaches up to rub her eyes. “They aren’t for me, Conner. They’re for you. I keep seeing a scared boy in my mind. I wish I could reach into the past and protect him.”

I smile sadly at her. “You may not have been able to protect me, but I’m glad you’re here right now.”

“Me too,” she says with a small smile.

“OK, enough deep thoughts. Let’s get you clean,” I announce as I get the shampoo from my dispenser and start to massage it in her thick hair. I like doing this. I like the little mews she makes and how her eyes close with contentment. I like way too many things about her.

After rinsing off, I grab us towels and let Vivienne use the facilities while I check my phone. Still no messages from my father. It’s not shocking. In fact, it’s eerily normal. Something about it doesn’t sit right with me. I don’t like it, considering everything else that’s going on lately.

I look at the doorframe as Vivienne walks into the room, completely naked. She looks perfect in my room as if she was the missing thing that turned my house into a home.

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She sits on the edge of the bed and crosses her legs, unbashful about her body. I finish with my phone and set it on the charging stand as I pull back the comforter for us.

“Are you sure?” she asks, cocking her head to one side.

Am I sure? That’s a loaded question if I ever did hear one. I check myself. Yes, I want her here in bed. I want to wake up with her next to me. That’s a first. Normally, if a woman gave me the perfect out, I’d take it in a heartbeat.

“Yes, get in,” I command. She studies me for a long beat, presumably deciding what to do. I’m pleased when she crawls across the bed and settles herself under my blanket.

I crawl in beside her.

“Lights off,” I say to the automated system that controls my lights as I pull her against me. She places her head on my chest and giggles.

“What?” I prod.

Sighing she nestles closer to me, wrapping an arm over my chest.

“Is everything in your homes automated in some way? Do you do anything manually?” The words are out of her mouth before she realizes the sexual innuendo.

I smirk even though she can’t see my face. “Oh, curious cat, I do many things

manually as you just experienced.”

She groans, making my smirk widen. Slapping my chest, she glances up at me. “You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

I shrug. “I’ve been called worse.”

“I’m sure you have,” she mumbles.

I chuckle and her head bounces on my chest. “So fiery.”

She pokes my side and looks up at me. “I’m only fiery because I have to put up with your assholishness.”

“I’m sorry, is that a real word? Do you use that in news articles?”

“Yes, all the time,” she says in a mocking tone.

I place my hand on her head and force her to resume using my chest as a pillow. She complies after giving me a glaring look.

“Curtains closed,” I say. The blackout curtains in my room close over the blinds, creating a space of complete darkness. It’s funny how when one sense is removed, the others become heightened. My memory drifts to my granny, and all the happy times I had with her as she taught me how to do things in the dark. She was the one to teach me that you can live in the darkness without being scared, little did she know just how relevant that lesson would be in other areas of my life.

Her skin feels smoother. I can smell my shampoo on her hair as I lean my nose into her wavy locks. I can hear her soft breaths and feel them on my chest.

I bring my hand up and cover hers. It feels small in my hand. I run my thumb over the back of it. Her skin is soft and delicate. She seems almost fragile, yet I know she's fierce.

She relaxes more, draping her leg over mine. Normally, cuddling after sex isn't my thing, but this...has me wanting more. After kissing her head, I lean back into my pillow and make the executive decision that for the moment, I'm going to just let this be what it's going to be. I'm going to enjoy this moment, while I feel calm and happy. I'll figure out the rest later.

Chapter 16

Vivienne

I wake from the heat. I'm so hot. Why am I so hot?

I struggle to move, but I can't. My eyes fly open in fear as I try to figure out where I am. It's pitch black, and it takes me a long moment to realize that I'm in Conner's bed. And...I'm the little spoon. Conner's arms are wrapped around me, and his one leg is over mine, essentially covering my body with his. He's like the surface of the sun. I can't tell what time it is in the dark confines of his bedroom. I try to squirm loose, but he just tightens his grip. He mutters something in his sleep.

I manage to get the comforter off me and sigh when the cool air hits my skin. His hand moves and covers my breast. He squeezes slightly.

"Conner?" I mumble.

"Go back to sleep," he mutters.

"I'm hot," I say, squirming some more.

“I know you are.”

“No, like you are a living furnace.”

He chuckles and pushes away from me. He reaches for something and a remote lights up. He presses a button, and I hear a slight whirring of a motor. The bed starts to cool. I roll over and stare at his face that’s now illuminated by the dim light of the remote.

“What is that?”

“The bed has air-conditioning,” he states matter-of-factly. “Now, come back over here. It’s early.”

“How do you even know what time it is?” I ask as the remote light goes out, leaving us in blackness again.

“Because if it was time to get up, my curtains would be open.”

“Your curtains are on a timer?”

“Yes, now go back to sleep.”

“Dear God, you really are the top five percent,” I mutter as I let him wrap his body around mine again.

His hot breath is at my ear, and he chuckles. “Top one percent,” he corrects.

I don't ask any more questions because it's late. How is he that rich? I get his dad is, but he just owns a lobbying firm. Did his dad give him money? Or maybe it was his grandfather? He mentioned his grandfather, Wilson Sterling. The man is elusive as fuck. I could barely find any information about him when I wrote that article about Theo Sterling and his family. It wasn't for a lack of trying. I'd eventually given up and pivoted to Theo and his wife. And Theo did not disappoint, so I took my lead and wrote the story.

"How rich are you exactly?" I murmur as I close my eyes.

He kisses my head again. "Rich enough."

I have so many questions, but suddenly, I'm tired again and find myself drifting off to sleep.

* * *

It's the light and the cold that wake me. And the smell of coffee? I open an eye and see that the room is indeed flooded with light. The curtains are open, although sheer blinds still cover the windows from prying eyes.

I slowly open my other eye and look around the room. I'm very much aware that I'm alone. I get up and find my clothes. Putting them back on, I head out in search of Conner.

The smell of the coffee leads me into a very modern kitchen. The style of this penthouse is completely opposite to his home. It's sleek and industrial with touches of exposed brick and metal pipes. I wonder what style he prefers. The two homes are as opposite as the extremes of his personality. One second, he's gentle and loving, and then the next second, he's like an attacking lion.

Conner is standing there in a three-piece suit and white button-down shirt. It's unbuttoned at the top with no tie. A tattoo peeks out from underneath. He looks...dangerous.

"Where are you off to?" I ask as I lean against the doorjamb.

"I have a meeting this morning," he states. I glance at my phone and look back at him. It's early, not quite seven yet. Clearly, he doesn't want me to know. And if I'm being honest with myself, that sort of pisses me off. I get we aren't a forever situation, but he needs to either trust me or not. Being in this limbo of trust on certain topics and not on others has me starting to see red.

"Fine, I need to get to work," I say with a shrug as I head to his door.

He follows me. "You can stay. Have coffee."

"Nope. I'll go home," I state as I press the call button on the elevator.

He steps in front of me. "You can stay."

"And I am also free to leave," I snarl as I step around him.

"What the hell is wrong?" he asks as he pulls on his beard in frustration.

The elevator doors open, and I step inside.

"Either we are open and honest with each other, or we are nothing more than a convenient fuck at a convenient time. So, let's call this what it is...or was. We had a symbiotic relationship. I'll share the information I get from Jared with you, and we can go our separate ways."

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“What the fuck are you even talking about?”

I sigh, I need to leave. I need to focus on my meeting tonight and being around Conner is making me lose any sensibility I once had. How does this man drive me so insane?

“I thought we were in this together, Conner. But if you want to keep secrets, then we can keep this professional. You can’t be one way part of the time and another the other part,” I state as I press the ground-level button.

“Vivienne...” he starts.

“No,” I reply as the doors shut, leaving me with one last glimpse of his face. It’s a mixture of anger, confusion, and concern. I should care and I do, but if I’ve learned anything, it’s that secrets only lead to more pain, and I’m over that. No more secrets. No more pain.

I head back to my apartment and change into my lounge clothes. I need to get back to my research.

My phone pings with a text. I look down. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I was hoping that it was Conner, but it’s not. It’s Jared.

Jared: You still good for six at Le Fleuve?

I reply yes and go back to my computer. I had started digging through documents that I received from a source at Roman Cavilieri’s shipping company. Roman is a

longtime friend of Theo. They often do business together, thus the need to gather more information. Lucky for me, Martin's cousin works there, and after meeting with him, he agreed to get me files. He's also on his way out of the company in a few weeks, so it was a final parting gift to his employer. And even more lucky for me is that he was working on several shipping deals involving both Cavilieri's and Sterling's companies.

The file took overnight to download. It's a huge amount of information and will likely take me a few days to go through it all.

I decide to start with emails. There are so many and most subject lines have me putting them in the "useless" category. I find a few that I flag for further examination later. The ones that pique my interest the most happen to be correspondence with the White House. Aaron Beacher. He is the press secretary, which seems like an odd choice for contact with a shipping company.

I deep-dive into Aaron Beacher. I know he's a member of the brotherhood, but otherwise, I have very little information about him.

My deep dive leads to a canyon of background. Aaron's links to President Jason Lewis. Hell, he was in TOD with Conner, Sebastian, and Aiden. He clearly got his cozy job by kissing the asses of the TOD elite. It's interesting how many things he's involved in at the White House. Jobs that normally the press secretary wouldn't have any part of, yet he's there. Noted at meetings. Noted by the press at certain events.

He seems to be everywhere, even when President Lewis isn't there. There are a number of photos of him with Conner. Could Conner be overlooking obvious people in his search to find who is behind everything? My phone pings with an alarm and I realize that I've spent the entire day researching.

"Fuck," I mutter as I jump up and run to grab a shower. I spend the entire time that

I'm getting ready, having my computer read me emails. I toss on a black knee-length dress. I want to look nice but not too nice. Am I using Jared? Yes. Do I want to lead Jared on too much? No. It's a fine line to walk.

My phone texts with a message from Jared stating a car is on its way to pick me up. I turn off my computer and begin to go through my conversation points. I've been contemplating what to say to him all week. I need to get him talking about his company. It needs to be strategic. Jared is smart, and he knows I'm friends with Conner. It's going to be a tough conversation for sure.

I go to the waiting car and watch the people out enjoying their evenings as the car passes each street block. The driver pulls up to a restaurant that I haven't been to yet. It's impossible to get reservations here. Jared wants to impress me. I file that away.

The driver lets me out, and I head to the hostess table. She immediately whisks me through the restaurant to a private table in a back courtyard. There are no other tables out there. Twinkling lights hang overhead and outdoor heaters keep the patio feeling comfortable even with the evening chill in the air.

"Mr. Pallin says he is running a few moments late, Ms. Westerly, and please order a cocktail and peruse the menu while you wait. He sends his apologies," a waiter says after I'm seated.

I nod as he hands me a menu and goes through it. I order a cocktail and take out my phone.

No calls or texts from Conner. I'm not sure why I keep checking. I'm over him. I'm done with his split personality, crazy issues. I don't know what I thought we had. I suppose it was those fleeting moments together, those little seconds of time where I swear I saw a different side of him; those precious few minutes where he shared his past with me, trusted me. It was like winning the lottery. Why did I care so much? I

shouldn't ever care about a subject like that. And that's all he was, a subject, a source, a person who was helping me with a story. Hell, a person who was part of the story.

The waiter sets down my drink and I take a long sip, calming my nerves.

"So sorry I'm late, Vivienne," Jared's voice rings out from behind me. I go to stand to greet him, but he leans down and kisses my cheek. I'm not sure how to feel about that. It feels...too intimate. I mean, we are acquainted, but a kiss-on-the-cheek acquainted?

"No worries," I state as I pull myself together.

"Oh, good. You ordered a drink," he says as he sits, and the waiter comes over to take his order as well as go over the menu with him.

Jared proceeds to make small talk while we sip our cocktails. I decide quickly having spent some time with him at the gala and now here, that this man loves to have people blow smoke up his ass. He wants to be praised.

"How did you become so successful at such a young age?" I ask. "It's very impressive," I add quickly.

He eyes me up, but smiles, which makes me relax.

"I work hard. And I used my connections."

"It must be hard to run such an important company."

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He leans back and studies me. “Do you want to write about me or the company, Vivienne?”

Damn, Jared is smarter than I give him credit for.

I consider my words before I speak. “Both. You are the face of Confervo. Your story is its story.”

He nods after a moment. “Are we on the record?”

“Only if you want to be,” I state.

“I’d rather we keep tonight casual. I can set up a meeting in my office next week to discuss formalities.”

Damn.

“Do you mind if I just ask a few questions tonight? Off the record, of course. I’m just curious, to be honest,” I say as I sip more of my drink.

The waiter chooses this moment to walk up to us. We place our food orders.

“What would you like to know?” he says as he steeples his fingers in front of him.

I pretend to be nonplussed about his agreeing to my questions.

“Confervo is an international company. There have been so many issues with

shipping lately, having enough product is key. How do you keep your competitive edge?"

He takes a sip of his drink. "We have a great shipping company. I believe you know this."

Fuck.

"Sterling Corporation?"

He nods. I decide to go in for the kill.

"Do you find they meet all your needs?"

"For the most part, yes." He watches me intently as though trying to figure out what game I'm playing. He wants to be the cat in his game of cat and mouse. I'll let him think he's one.

"You're lucky. Burling Pharmaceuticals has really suffered from their shipping agreements lately."

I see a flash in his eyes alerting me to the fact that my statement was not what he thought I'd say.

"Are you writing about them, too?"

I shrug. "I like to keep my options open." I pause as the server sets our entrees down in front of each of us and explains them before stepping away. "They found a shipping company that keeps up with their demands by shipping twice a week from their European factories in Germany. They get supplies in on Monday and Friday."

Jared smiles at this information. It may be a slight lie, I don't know what days they actually have shipments.

“Ours is better,” he says with a smirk as he takes a bite of his steak.

“Oh?”

“Yes, rest assured. We have the edge on them.”

I lean forward. “Sterling Corporation has your product arriving more than twice a week?”

He nods. “And we have the middle of the week covered.”

Bingo.

“Wow. That's great. I'd love to chat more about it at our meeting.”

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“Of course. But no more work talk tonight. Tell me, how’s your grandfather?”

We launch into more small talk. I dodge his unwanted touches throughout the meal. This is going to be a long night. If I can only figure out how to bow out of this without making it look like I’m a tease. I don’t want to burn my bridge with Jared. I may need him later for more intel.

Chapter17

Conner

I can just barely see her from the bar where I sit nursing my drink. I’m not sure why I’m here. It was hard for me to deduce where they would go. Jared would of course go to the newest, priciest, and hardest-to-get-a-reservation-at restaurant in all of D.C.

I can see him continually trying to bring his hand over to her leg under the table. I’ll give it to her, Vivienne is dodging his advances like a pro. While I’m pissed as hell at her, I wasn’t about to let her come here alone.

Part of me wanted to leave her to her own devices tonight. Part of me wants to drag her to the bathroom, spank her for the outburst at my apartment, and then fuck some sense into her.

I look at my drink. I needed this. I went to see my father this morning.

He was conveniently not there. So, naturally, I’ve spent the entire day stewing over him and Vivienne. Pricilla kicked me out of the office an hour ago, saying I was

“being an intolerable ass and needed to go have a drink or a fuck.” She’s not wrong. I was being an intolerable ass. And I did need a distraction. Yet, here I am. Not distracted at all. In fact, I’m laser-focused on the woman across the restaurant. Does she normally do this? Prostituting herself out for information.

I throw back my drink and motion for the bartender to pour another. I can feel my security guy staring at me, whose name I finally figured out is Silas. Silas has been my shadow all day, while the other guy, Riker, stayed back at the house. Apparently, there are two others assigned to me that handle the night shifts. Four fucking security guards. I hate it. Did I have security growing up? Yep. Did I have a guy following me everywhere? Nope. Dad only guarded his precious home, making it very clear that his things are priceless, but not his people. People are expendable to my father. He once said to me after my mother died that loving people is a weakness, that if you love someone, it can be used against you, but if you love no one, then you are invincible.

I used to think the man was delusional for saying that, but right now, as I watch Vivienne with Jared, his words haunt me. I shouldn’t be here. I should cut this off now. Screw her information. Screw whatever fucked-up alliance we formed. Screw that I felt myself on the edge of caring deeply for this woman.

Then I see Jared grab her arm and rub his thumb over her skin. She attempts to pull back, but he leans and whispers something to her. She laughs, but I know it’s not a real laugh. She’s trying to play it cool.

Fuck no. I get up, toss money down on the bar that more than covers the cost of my drinks, and stride across the restaurant. Jared looks up as I approach the table. His hand quickly releases Vivienne’s arm.

“Conner, nice to see you,” he says. He’s fighting a smirk and I want to smack it right off his face. I look over at Vivienne whose face is white. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m interrupting her date or because Jared is manhandling her. It doesn’t matter.

“Jared,” I acknowledge.

I can see Vivienne give the smallest headshake, begging me to leave. I don’t want to. I want to punch Jared’s smug face, grab Vivienne, toss her on this table, and fuck her right in front of the entire restaurant so everyone knows she’s mine, but that would be...uncivilized of me. I can’t say no to this woman. Fuck.

“Nice to see you,” Vivienne says, composing herself.

My eyes meet hers. “Nice to see you, too,” I reply, my words have so much more meaning than a simple hello.

“Well,” I start as I pull myself together, “enjoy your dinner.”

I step away but only because of Vivienne’s pleading look. I find myself heading to the bathrooms. I look at myself in the mirror and splash water on my face. What the fuck am I doing? This woman has me losing my godforsaken mind.

My memories of the final moments with my mother bubble to the surface. Her laughter, her dark hair glistens in the moonlight as she waved at me from the pier before turning and walking onto our boat. The wind blows her white nightgown. I don’t know why she went down there. She just had kissed me goodnight and said she was taking a walk.

Vivienne’s article guessed it was a rival of my father’s, an enemy, that blew up the boat. The police had ruled it an accidental death and claimed it was faulty electrical wiring on the vessel. My father said nothing about the police report or *The Tribune* article. My gut tells me my father played fire with the brotherhood, and the brotherhood bit back. The elite have a way of putting members in their place. That’s why I’m one hundred percent sure that former President Westerly had his granddaughter’s articles altered.

I go to open the bathroom door and see Vivienne entering the ladies' room. I look both ways as she shuts the door, and I push it open. She stumbles back, surprised at my intrusion as I step inside and shut the door behind us, locking it. I step toward her, and she steps back until she's flush against the wall with nowhere to go.

"What do you think you are doing?" I growl as I place a hand above her head and lean in until our noses are only inches apart.

Her face flushes. "I'm having my meeting with Jared...as planned," she says with a defiant raise of her chin. She glares at me. "I'd assume you understand all about meetings."

I raise an eyebrow. What the hell is she playing at?

"He's touching you," I state in a low voice because lowering my voice right now is the only thing I can control. Internally, I'm ready to punch a wall.

"He likes me," she hisses.

"Is that how you plan on getting your 'intel'?" I ask, narrowing my eyes. "You plan to fuck the answers out of him?"

She shoves my chest, but I'm not going anywhere. I lean my face down, running my nose along hers. I can see her chest rise on a breath. She's still affected by me. She can pretend all she wants that she doesn't like me, doesn't feel for me, but I can see, smell, and feel her body's reaction to my proximity.

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When she can't move me, she goes to duck under my arm, but I lower it, caging her in. She huffs in frustration. "I already got the intel."

My body stills at her words. "You did?"

"I did." She crosses her arms over her breasts in an attempt to show her disregard for my closeness. Only this backfires because now they are pushed up, exposing more of her creamy skin from beneath the neckline of her dress. This dress looks prim and proper, but I'd bet anything, she's wearing some power panties beneath it. My curious cat came to play. But why?

"And what did you learn?" I prod, not moving from in front of her face.

Our eyes are locked in a battle of wills, neither of us resolving to break the stare war we have intentionally begun.

"There are at least three shipments a week. And one is on Wednesdays," she replies giving me a pointed look as though to say, "See, I'm good at my job, so back the fuck off." Fair enough.

"Then, I guess we need to revisit the shipyard on a Wednesday," I respond.

"I guess we do," she answers. She looks at the closed door behind us. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have a date waiting for me."

"Like fuck you do," I say, my voice rising a bit.

She sighs and motions between us. “This isn’t going to work. We both know it. Why drag it out? We had some hot sex. Great. You don’t think I’m the devil reincarnate, but let’s be fair, you still have your secrets, and I don’t do secrets. I sure as fuck don’t build relationships on a platform made of them.”

“Who said I had secrets?”

She laughs. “Right? Are you being serious right now?”

“Yes. I. Am,” I state.

Rolling her eyes, she manages to duck under my arm this time. She walks to the door and looks back at me. “I was serious when I said this won’t work. Ditch the suit and meet me in front of Bubba’s Bar at eight Wednesday night.”

And with that she walks out the door, leaving me in stunned silence. No woman has ever left me in stunned silence. What. The. Fuck?

The primal part of me is ready to follow her out of the bathroom, toss her over my shoulder, smack that peach of an ass, and walk right out of this restaurant.

I leave the bathroom and head out the front door. Silas is at my back.

“Sir?” he asks.

I hold up a hand. “I want to walk back. Keep your distance.” He obliges and I spend eight blocks stewing over my conversation with Vivienne. This woman drives me insane. I don’t even know what to do with her.

I place earbuds in as I walk and dial Aiden. “What’s up?”

“Call me on the alt,” I state as I hang up and switch to my burner phone. We’ve all had one from time to time. It’s a way we can keep in touch without concerns of being listened to by unwanted ears.

“What?” he asks as his call comes through on my other phone.

“I’m going to the shipyard on Wednesday night.”

“Why Wednesday?”

“Because Vivienne met with Jared and got intel. It’s probably the best chance we have to find the containers with the drug,” I explain.

“Jesus, it’s a near impossible mission, you know that, right?”

“What else have you learned?”

“Hold on,” he says, “I’m three-waying Sebastian.”

A second later, Sebastian answers. “What?”

“Love you, too,” I say.

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“I’m a little busy. Is this important?” he questions.

I sigh. “Might as well go to speaker and let Alexis hear this because she’s as much a part of this shitshow as we are.”

Sebastian has told Alexis everything but a few details regarding the vows we took and how intense our commitment is.

“Hi,” Alexis says.

“Hey,” Aiden replies.

“A shipment may be coming in on Wednesday,” I restate.

“Do you think it’ll be there? I don’t know how much they are bringing in,” Alexis asks.

“I don’t know. But it’s a starting point. What else have you learned?”

“Well, I can tell you that I’m almost certain that there are five members of the elite,” she says.

We all pause. Because we know who the council members are, but the elite are a secret. We, peon members aren’t allowed to know. And none of the three of us are elite.

“OK, so do we know who they are?”

“So, I assume all three of your fathers and two others,” she says.

“Why our fathers? Aren’t there older members that would serve as the elite?” I ask.

“That’s a good question,” Alexis says. I grin. I like this woman. She has fire in her eyes, and she doesn’t put up with Sebastian’s power trips. “So, in my digging, I was looking for who we think is on the council and then when we thought maybe they were meeting and where certain members of the brotherhood were during that time period. It was a lot of cross-referencing, but I did learn something by trying to do that same exercise around the time I was abducted, in conjunction with some things Sebastian shared with me about the brotherhood. I’m fairly certain the elite are hand-picked. When one member passes on or steps down, a new member is chosen by the remaining elites. I’m guessing at least one of the elites is an older member. And there are probably several former elites that have retired from their positions.”

“Wait, why do you think all three of our dads are involved?” Aiden asks.

“Based on their whereabouts, and also based on the history of the organization. It tends to stay within families. The council is comprised of twenty-five. The elite are five. For a total of thirty. The brotherhood membership is from approximately seven universities with ties to political and business powerhouse families. I’d guess the total membership based on TOD public numbers probably stands somewhere around two or three-hundred members total. But that is only a guess based on what TOD chapters feed into the brotherhood. TOD total membership is in the thousands. I’m still tracking the history of how this subset of TOD became the brotherhood. I hope to have more soon on that,” she finishes. Most of what she’s found, we already know, but the tracking of people’s locations when she was abducted is interesting information. I cringe at the thought of any of our pledge brothers being elite.

I’m nearing my apartment. “Vivienne is working on the links to Confervo. We need good intel on the council and elite if we are taking this down. And we need to figure

out our exit plan.”

“Our exit plan?” Aiden asks.

“When this goes down, it’s going to be bad,” Sebastian states.

“When this goes down, this city is going to implode,” I correct. “We need to work out how and when we’ll expose it. I’ll be in touch.” I hang up and head up to my penthouse, wondering who the other two members of the elite are, and how much they know about what we are doing.

Chapter 18

Vivienne

Before I was interrupted by a temper-tantrum-throwing Conner in the ladies’ room, I was about to place my call to Heather Delphine, another investigative journalist at The Tribune. We have a long-standing agreement that we bail each other out of bad interview situations. I quickly send a text on my way back to the table.

Jared is on his phone but politely places it back in his pocket. I sit and give him a smile as my phone rings. I pull it out and frown.

“I’m so sorry, but I need to take this,” I say with an apologetic smile. He nods, and I take the call from Heather while turning slightly away from him.

“Hey, is everything OK?” I answer with my typical “exit plan” opening.

“Beotch, you best have details as to this issue. Also, you owe me. I am legit trying to get an interview with this congressman and his staff is at the bar right now.”

“Oh my God! Is she going to be OK?” I ask. I see Jared’s eyes rise to look at me.

“I thought you just had a dinner meeting. What’s with the theatrics?”

“Yes, I am. Yes, I can be there. I’ll come right now. No, it’s alright. I’m sure he’ll understand. It’ll be fine. OK. Bye,” I hang up but still manage to hear Heather’s whispered, “For the love of...” before the phone cuts off.

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I look over at Jared with my patented look of concern and worry that I have perfected over my short career.

“I am so very sorry. That’s my best friend. Her mother just got rushed to the hospital with a possible heart attack. She’s all alone and freaking out. I promised I’d meet her there,” I say with my best impression of a worried bestie.

“Oh, dear. Can I offer you a ride?” he asks.

“No, that’s so kind of you. I’m actually going to grab a car ride and pick up another friend of ours. It sounds like it will be a long night, and she’ll need all the support she can get. I just hope her mother will be OK. I’m so sorry to leave you before dessert. Can I call you about getting together next week?” I ask sweetly.

“Of course, let me walk you out at least,” he says as he raises a finger and tells the waiter to put the meal on his tab as he drops a sizeable tip on the table.

I nod and order a car as we stand, and he escorts me to the front. Thankfully the car is already there. He leans over in an attempt to kiss me, but I turn a bit and the kiss ends up on my cheek. I smile shyly as I pull back. Best to play the innocent damsel card with this guy.

“Thanks again, it was a lovely meal,” I say to him as he opens the door.

“Please text me that you arrived safely,” he says.

“I will,” I say as he closes the door. The second we pull away, I feel my shoulders

relax. I drop my head back against the headrest and take a shuddering breath. Why do I feel as though that meeting wasn't just about me getting information? Jared was sizing me up, but why? What does he know? Is he involved with whoever was chasing us from the shipyard?

I have the driver go by the hospital. I don't see anyone following us, but I can't be too sure. I tell him to pull around to a side entrance, and I'll meet him there in two minutes. He does as instructed, and I walk through the hospital.

My phone rings and I look down. Conner.

"Yes?"

"Are you still at the restaurant dining with the enemy?"

If I could reach through the phone and strangle him, I would.

"I am on my way home." I pause because right now, I don't want to deal with him, but I also think we need to make some changes if we plan on actually being able to get to the shipyard without being tracked. I have a backup plan I use often for situations where I need to get away from the world. In my old apartment, there was a lovely little old couple, the Hodgekins. They spend most of the year at a condo in Florida. But they keep an apartment in the city for the summer, so they can visit friends, family, and doctors. I keep tabs on it for them. Checking in periodically and reporting back that all is good. They have always offered for me to stay the night if I need to or if I'm nearby and it's late. And tonight, I'm taking them up on their offer.

I contemplate what to tell Conner. Hell, are the phone lines even secure? Do I want to talk to him tonight after the shit he pulled at the restaurant? I decide that figuring things out tonight is too important, even more important than figuring out what the fuck is happening between Conner and me.

“Conner...” I trail off as I consider my next words. “I know this will sound strange, but I’m leaving a handwritten message at my front desk for you. I need you to go over there and pick it up, now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just...please,” I beg.

There’s a pause and a sigh. “Fine.”

“It’ll explain everything. We can talk after,” I say as I hang up and get back in the car. I have him take me to the back entrance of my apartment complex where I go to the small front desk, leave a long note for Conner, and grab a bag of things from my apartment before getting back in the car with the driver who I instruct to drive me to my final destination.

The driver makes small talk, but inside my head, I’m contemplating so many things. I’m not typically a conspiracy theorist. But right now, I feel like I don’t know who I can trust. I don’t want to trust Conner, but something in my gut tells me that I can and I should.

I get out at my old complex, thankful that I keep their key on my keyring. I walk up to their second-floor apartment and go inside to wait.

I hook up my computer to their Wi-Fi after changing a few settings to redirect my computer, a little hack I learned when interviewing a computer expert a few years ago. I pull out my memory stick of data and start going through the information again while I wait. I also have emails from a source at Confervo. I decide to switch my search and look at those first.

I curse at myself. I should have been more careful, more aware. Instead, Conner

sucked me down his rabbit hole, and I stopped paying attention to little details. I can't do that again. It could cost me my life. Part of me is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to expose what I believe is an evil entity at work in the nation's capital, but I'll be damned if I'm going to get killed before I finish this article. I will get to the bottom of things if it's the last thing I do.

I pull up an email and read it twice. It's about a campaign contribution from Confervo to the PAC that ran President Lewis's campaign. It's talking about giving more and the reply from the finance department inquires why. There is no response, at least not via email.

I switch my search to look for more emails with this person. Jackpot. Jared emailed this Josef Klinsky at least two dozen times during the campaign season. The initial contribution was five million dollars. At another point, he sends two million and then three million. Then ten million. What is this about? The numbers start adding up, the contribution is high by the time I finish reading the emails. The emails read like a bank ledger. I go back and check key campaign points. There's a clear match between big events that President Lewis had during the campaign season and the dates that money was sent to his PAC.

On a whim, I check public campaign contributions from the Sterling Corporation to President Lewis's campaign. They are substantial, more substantial than to any other political campaign. It doesn't make sense.

A knock at the door has me jumping, I run over and peek through the peephole. Conner.

I tentatively open the door. He looks...concerned. I wave him inside and look both ways out in the corridor before closing it behind us and sliding the chain through the lock and then bolting the door.

I turn and lean against the door.

“Will I be getting an explanation now?” he asks with a raised eyebrow.

I look past him to the little galley kitchen. I already set myself up in their small guest room, but I look toward it now wondering if Conner should stay here with me.

“Sit,” I say as I motion to the sofa. He complies and I follow him, careful to not sit too close because I don’t trust myself. I can’t be distracted and everything about Conner Sterling is distracting.

“I think they are watching us,” I announce.

He nods. “They are.” He doesn’t seem at all surprised.

“But...aren’t you concerned?” I ask, perplexed why he knew and didn’t tell me and also why he isn’t concerned.

He turns his body toward me, and I can tell he’s weighing his words before speaking. “When we took the vow...we agreed to several things. Our lives...are always open to the brotherhood. In return, we are guaranteed success. We state our dreams, what we want to do in life, and that is part of the agreement. For me, it was building my lobbying firm. I did understand the importance of my father’s company and the work he does. I also understood why the world needs shipping. And I loved political science. At nineteen years old, that was the future I wanted. I knew when I turned twenty-one that I’d start to get access to the trust fund my grandfather made for me as well as the money my mother left me, and those things could help me create my

lobbying firm. Of course, my father's friends helped as well when the time came since my father messed with my money. The brotherhood must have felt it was a worthy cause because they didn't stop it, but they also didn't make it easy. Once they saw its relevance for the greater good of the brotherhood, then suddenly my firm started doing very well."

"But what if your dreams change? People change," I interject.

"They do. And that can be accommodated. The brotherhood isn't inflexible. However, your goals must align with theirs."

I swallow because I know what their goals are, at the core of the brotherhood they want power, wealth, and prestige.

"And so they are constantly watching you?" I ask again.

"They can. They typically don't. And there are ways around it," he explains as he pulls a phone from his pocket. "Burner phones. Cash purchased pre-paid credit cards. My security is always looking for and removing security breaches. I only trust certain security firms. Lately, my new firm is doing more than usual."

"But...if you knew all of this, then why the hell did we take your car the other day?"

"Because I was being reckless," he admits as he runs his hand over his chin, scratching his beard, which I have come to find is one of his tells. He does it when he is exasperated.

"Would they kill you?" I whisper, my eyes widening as realization dawns on me. My mouth falls open as I take my thought a step farther. His mother. "Oh God! Your mother!"

He looks down. His nod is nearly imperceptible, but I see it. “It’s why I try not to be close to too many people. We knew our fathers were in the council when we joined. We also knew as members we would be protected. They only take out members who break the vow. But they will use loved ones against us.”

“What did he do?” I ask.

“He crossed the wrong brother from what I can know, which isn’t much. He got cocky and he paid the price.” He pauses and looks into my eyes. “He knew what the collateral damage would be, and he did what he did anyhow. For that, I will never forgive him.”

“What exactly did he do?” I ask.

“He used the knowledge he learned in privilege for a business deal that screwed over another member of the council. At least, that’s the rumor I was told, but it sounds like something my father would do. He’s never talked about it with me, never confirmed it, but it makes sense,” he says.

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are dealing with ruthless killers,” he says.

I swallow. “How ruthless are we talking? Would they just walk up and shoot you?”

Conner laughs. “No. Definitely not. They wouldn’t ever do something that implicates them. There are...resources and rules to follow. First, a warning. Then, collateral damage. Third strike, you are out.”

I wrack my brain at every sudden death of powerful members of this city. How many were linked to the brotherhood?

“I see what you’re thinking. Don’t try to figure it out. It could take a lifetime.”

I slink against the back of the sofa, feeling completely overwhelmed. “We don’t stand a chance, do we?” I whisper.

He moves toward me, a single finger lifting my chin.

“We do. And we will. We’ve put a plan in motion, and there is no turning back now.” He’s quiet for a long few seconds. “I admit, we may end up paying the ultimate sacrifice, but I’ll do what I can to protect us, all of us.”

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“Who is all of us?” I ask because I want to confirm that my thoughts on this and his are the same.

“Sebastian, Alexis, Aiden, Ella, you, and me,” he says.

“Who’s Ella?”

“Aiden’s ex. She’s been helping us a bit, but enough that we’ll need to protect her.”

“Fuck. OK. So what is your plan?”

This time, it’s him that swallows. “We’re taking it down.”

“Taking what down?”

He gives me a pointed look. I don’t understand.

“All of it.”

I try to process his words, and when I do, I feel goose bumps rise on my arms.

“You’re bringing down the brotherhood?”

“Yes. Its time is over. We think...shit, hold on,” he says as he pulls out the burner phone and taps out a message. The phone buzzes almost immediately with a response.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“If we’re doing this, then we’re doing this together.”

“I’m sorry, what are you talking about?”

“I’ve invited them all here. Well, aside from Ella. Aiden will have to fill her in.”

“Good, I guess, but they need to be careful...this is...my secret location.”

He smiles at me like I’m a child that just told him what I want Santa to bring me.

“Hand me your phone,” he says.

I roll my eyes and pull my phone out of my pocket. It’s turned off.

“OK, I underestimated you.”

“I’m not stupid, you know?”

“I never said you were. I just wanted to make sure we don’t have any trackers. They all know to go off-grid before coming here. We’ve been dodging surveillance since the day we took the vow.”

“They don’t catch you?” I ask, now I’m curious. It’s like an underground group of a secret society that operates in a void beyond the darkness.

“No. The night we took the vow, the three of us made our own pact. It’s stronger than the vow; it’s an unbreakable vow. If one of us goes, we all go,” he explains. He pauses for a moment as I process his answer. “You have intel, new intel, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I reply with a nod, “but I’ll wait until they arrive.”

He scoots toward me. “Why did you think I was keeping secrets?”

Sighing I bend my elbow that’s on the back of the sofa and rest my head in my hand. “You were going to a meeting, and I know it’s about all of this and you wouldn’t tell me. How am supposed to trust you if you keep things from me? I mean, I get that you won’t tell me everything, but if it helps this...issue, then...” I trail off because now I feel like I sound stupid.

I feel his hand on my chin again, this time his thumb strokes over my bottom lip. I don’t want to feel anything for him. I want to guard my heart, but this man does things to me.

“I was going to try to meet with my father, but he dodged me yet again,” he admits. “I...don’t like to talk about him and I knew you’d ask questions.”

Now I feel silly. Why did I jump to conclusions? Why did I let my emotions get the better of me? Because...I love this man. Holy shit! I love Conner Sterling! I swallow hard, trying to force down the lump in my throat.

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“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he says softly. “I should have...I just...I have trust issues.” He chuckles. “I have a lot of fucking issues.”

“I can understand that,” I answer.

“I know you can. I was trying to protect you. I want you, Vivienne, but I also know that right now, they could use you as a weapon against me and I can’t have that. I won’t put you in harm’s way,” he says as he leans in and presses his lips to mine.

“Don’t keep things from me,” I murmur against his lips.

“Don’t be a pain in my ass,” he retorts.

“Don’t be a giant asshole,” I reply as his tongue traces my lips.

“But I’m so good at it,” he teases.

I poke his ribs, and he chuckles. I’m about to jump him when there is a knock at the door. He pulls back. “Stay here.”

I comply this time as he walks to the door, looks through the peephole, and opens it. A second later, Aiden, Alexis, and Sebastian walk into the apartment.

“A secret hideaway? Fancy,” Sebastian jokes.

I offer them water, but everyone declines as they take seats in the living room.

“OK, you gonna share why you called us over here?” Aiden asks as he puts his arm on the armrest of the leather recliner.

“What did you find out?” Conner asks me as he motions for me to share the information with everyone.

“I think this goes higher than you all think it does,” I start.

Chapter19

Conner

“What do you mean ‘higher’?” I ask.

Vivienne shifts in her seat and looks from each of us to the next. “I think President Lewis is involved. And what about Aaron Beacher? Do you trust him?”

I look at Sebastian, and he looks at Aiden.

“Why do you think that? And yes, we trust Aaron,” Sebastian responds.

“Well, I did some research and Aaron is very connected and involved at the White House. It’s just...unusual. And, in terms of President Lewis, I...have a source...let’s just say there are some interesting emails that led me down a rabbit hole looking at campaign funds. Confervo and Sterling Corporation have both given substantial amounts of money to President Lewis.”

“How substantial?” I question. She’s dead wrong about Aaron. He once covered for me when my father was being an asshole. His actions proved his ethics. He would most definitely not be involved in what we are investigating.

She holds up a finger and runs into another room, when she comes back, she's holding her laptop. Setting it on her lap, she turns it around and shows us what she found. Going through each amount, dates, times, and sources. When she finishes, we all look at each other.

“Shit, they bought themselves a presidency,” Sebastian says dryly as he leans back in his seat. “I mean, it's not shocking. Look at your grandfather.” He motions at Vivienne.

She frowns as if she hadn't connected that dot. “Hold on,” she says.

She fishes in a bag and pulls out a thumb drive and plugs it into her computer. A few keystrokes later, she frowns deeply. “Well, shit. Adam Blake owns Halfagher, right?” she asks as she scans her notes.

“Yes,” Aiden says as he looks at Sebastian and me.

“Let me guess,” Alexis starts, “Adam is connected to TOD.”

We nod and Vivienne types quickly on her computer. “They made a substantial contribution to both my grandfather's campaign as well as President Lewis's.” Her nostrils flare. “Goddamn it! Confervo and Sterling Company again. For Pete's sake, have they bought every presidency?”

I swallow because she's probably right. What else do we buy?

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“We need to make a plan, now,” I state.

“We need more evidence,” Sebastian urges. “We need to connect Confervo to illegal activity. We need to take them down. If we can show they are bad, then the court of public opinion will do the rest for us.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like leaving loose ends,” Aiden speaks up as he leans forward. “I feel like we haven’t connected all the dots yet.”

“When the time comes, we need to get this published in The Tribune. We know someone has the ability to make last-minute changes beyond the editors. Do you have a way to bypass the normal process?” I ask. I want to tell her about my hunch that her grandfather has been tampering with her career, but I decide to save that for later when we are alone.

She taps her cheek and bites her lip as she thinks. I know when she figures out a way around the problem because her eyes light up and her lips curve up in a grin. “Why, yes, I think I do.”

“We need more than ‘think,’” Sebastian says.

“Don’t worry, I have a backup plan. I hate to give it to a competitor, but if I can get my friend who works the printing press and my other friend who does our IT work for the website to get this article out, we won’t need to give it to anyone else. If not, then I guess my college friend is gonna get the scoop of his life,” Vivienne says.

“Fair enough. We have a lot of work to do,” I point out.

Everyone nods. I look back at Vivienne. “Tell us what you learned from Jared.”

She debriefs everyone. Adding the information she learned about the mid-week shipments.

“Wait, so we think Jared might be aware that you guys went up there, right? Like he might be behind that car that was following you?” Alexis asks.

“Likely, or Conner’s dad was watching us,” Vivienne replies.

“So, what if...what if they want you to think that. What if he fed you the wrong information because he thinks you’ll try to go again and...” She trails off as everyone contemplates her thoughts.

“You’re sort of brilliant, little dove,” Sebastian says to her as he leans over and kisses her cheek. She blushes.

“What if it’s tonight?” she asks as she looks down at her phone. “What if he chose tonight for dinner because he hoped to distract you?”

“It’s a good theory,” Aiden says.

“It’s a solid theory,” Vivienne agrees.

“We can’t all go up there,” Sebastian points out as he looks at me.

“We’ll go,” I say to Aiden.

“I don’t think so. You and I will go. You’re both big, what if you need to fit into a tight spot? There’s no way. Plus, I’m not letting you finish this without me,” Vivienne says.

I don't like it. I don't like it one bit, but I can't deny she doesn't raise a good point. I know Vivienne well enough to know that if I don't let her come along, she'll figure out a way to go there alone, and that is not something I can allow.

"Fine, but you do as I say," I mutter as I clench my jaw tightly.

Vivienne rolls her eyes. "Will you stop acting like a caveman? I can hold my own."

"OK, then let's devise a plan because we need to get there unseen this time," I state as I lean forward. We all start discussing ideas. Alexis is the one who brilliantly recommends we use her roommate's extra car. Apparently, her roommate is ridiculously rich and has two cars. One is a black compact SUV. Perfect for our needs. Alexis calls Whitney on Sebastian's burner phone. After three calls, she finally picks up and agrees to drop her car in the parking garage at the local grocery store.

We call Bryce and have him set up surveillance by hacking into street cameras again. He says he needs one hour to set it up. He argues that his men should do this, but I dismiss him. I'm his client, not his employee. He does what I say. I have a feeling people don't often put Bryce Gallagher in his place, but right now, I don't give a fuck.

Once we have a plan, Vivienne and I walk down to the grocery store, while Alexis and Sebastian head out to create a distraction by going to my apartment and texting me that they are on their way to talk. Meanwhile, Aiden will call Ella to try to figure out what the containers might look like or what the liquid may be contained in once we find it.

I'm completely unsure what will happen tonight, but the plan is in action. I feel like what started as one simple investigation into a pharma company that was illegally bringing in drugs and killing young women with them, is now something so much bigger. It could take weeks to tie up all the loose ends, but when it's done, we are

going to have to find a safe haven. And if I've played my cards correctly, then I think I have just the place for us. We just have to live long enough to get there.

Chapter 20

Vivienne

Conner finds the key fob on top of the tire, and we get in the car. This time, he drives. We make it onto I-95 towards Baltimore without anyone following us. I can't believe we are doing this. I didn't expect my evening would take a one-eighty. I feel as though we are speeding toward an end, but I can't see what's ahead. In a matter of a few weeks, this man next to me has gone from enemy to lover, to a man I love, and in the meantime, my entire world has been turned upside down with revelations that seem as though I should have always suspected them. How did we all miss it? Hell, Sebastian, Conner, and Aiden are in this secret society, and even they were unaware of the broad reach of evil its leaders have. Conner especially should have seen this. His own mother was likely murdered by people he calls brothers. Was he just blind to it out of self-preservation? Did he really not truly understand until now? He's so smart, yet he was oblivious to everything happening around him until he was sucked into the vortex of malevolence.

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“We’re good,” I say as I lean back in the seat and look over at him. His profile is...perfection. Even now, as I sit contemplating everything happening, I can’t deny that this man makes me want to throw away my current life for five more minutes with him. I grimace. I may be doing that tonight. I know I forced his hand by demanding to be here. I know he doesn’t want me here. But I’ll be damned if he finishes what we started without me.

“Conner?”

He glances over at me and frowns. “What?”

“How did you not see this coming? How did you not know?” I ask. I can see his brows furrow as he considers my question.

“What was I supposed to know, Vivienne?”

I swallow. Is he pissed that I’ve asked the one-million-dollar question? Does Mr. High and Mighty not like being called out?

“You have to know the brotherhood stops at nothing to get what they want.”

“I know.”

“So why the fuck didn’t you try to stop them before? Or were they too helpful to you before, so you just let crimes go?”

His knuckles whiten as his grip tightens on the steering wheel. I’ve struck a nerve.

“Is this investigative journalist Vivienne asking?”

I roll my eyes. Of course, he goes there. “No, this is Vivienne, the woman you’re sleeping with and who is about to risk her life alongside you to bring down a secret society that’s apparently killing young women for sport.”

He looks back at me again. “I swear to you, Vivienne, I didn’t know it was at this level. When you’re a kid and you join a group, you don’t fully comprehend it. And then when I did, I knew, I just knew they were responsible for my mother’s death. I know what they’ve done, but it’s always been about members and the people they love. Never was it about innocent people that are in no way connected to us.”

“Oh, so you did know?”

He makes a sound that’s halfway between a sigh and a groan. “Fuck! You don’t understand. I can’t get out of this. There is only one way out. Do you understand? Doing this”—his hand motions around us—“is the ultimate betrayal. I don’t mean what we’re doing. Certain members are taking their power and using it in ways it should never be used. If we can’t stop that within our own organization, then any good, any inkling of good that comes of our vows is a farce. I’ve done fucked-up shit, Vivienne. I’m not proud of that, but I will be damned if I let innocent people die because I was a coward. That’s where I draw the line.”

“Maybe the people you love would want you to draw the line before them?”

His face now looks like he’s five seconds away from strangling me.

“I’ve been truthful to you. I also know my mother was aware that my father was involved in...criminal behavior, but she chose to stay.”

“That doesn’t mean that she chose to die!” I yell.

He slams a fist on the steering wheel and I jump.

“Fuck! Vivienne! I’m trying to make this right! We are trying to fix it. Should we have tried earlier? Maybe. But here we are. Will that ever be enough for you? Will I ever be enough for you?”

I’m shocked and silent as his words reverberate around the car. Can I forgive him for his sins? Is he asking me to? I swallow because his question is the most honest one he’s asked of me. I consider my answer. Have I been a saint? No. If I was given a green pass to success, would I have taken it as a young adult? Yes. Can I forgive him for overlooking things that were so obvious because he chose to turn a blind eye until now? That one I struggle with, but I know my answer. I may not like my answer. I may question my own morals for my answer. Conner Sterling isn’t a bad man. He can be an asshole. He can be a control freak. But deep down, he’s not a bad man.

“Yes. You...are enough,” I whisper. I watch his shoulders relax and his jaw unclench.

I put my hand on his. He looks down at our joined hands and moves his. At first, I’m hurt by his action until I realize he wants his on top. I bite my lip to keep from smiling. How am I smiling after that intense conversation? Will our relationship always be this passionate and full of extremes?

He lifts my hand to his lips and plants a kiss on it before setting them back down on the center console where he absentmindedly strokes my thumb with his. He chuckles when he looks over at me.

“Admit it,” he says.

“Admit what?”

“Admit that you like me being controlling.”

I glare at him. “Only when it comes to one thing,” I confess with a smirk.

He laughs again and shrugs. “I’ll take my wins where I can.”

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Suddenly, his hand moves off mine and onto my leg. I've changed into black yoga pants and a black hoodie. His fingers find the hem of my pants and slip inside them.

"Enough of this conversation. You need to relax," he states.

"Seriou..." The word dies on my lips as his finger slips between my folds. He expertly slides it up and down over my entrance, teasing me until I spread my legs, giving in to the need. I want more and he knows it.

"That's right, curious cat, let me take your mind off things," he says. I know this is taking his mind off things, too, as he sinks a finger inside me.

"Fuck, if we didn't need to be somewhere, I'd be pulling over at the next rest stop to fuck you in the back of this car."

"How very teenager of you," I murmur.

"I promise you it wouldn't be anything like the teenage car sex you had."

I don't have time to argue because he adds a second finger and presses his thumb to my clit as he pumps his fingers in and out of me. It doesn't take him long to find the spot where I need him. He keeps his eyes focused on the road while his hand expertly brings me over the edge.

I cry out as I come, my hips thrusting against his hand, my legs spread as wide as they can go in the small space of the passenger seat. I lean against the seat as I let my breath slow. He pulls his fingers away and brings them to his mouth where he sucks

on them.

“The things I’m going to do to you later...” he mutters with a smirk.

“Now, I just want to fuck you,” I say like a petulant child as I cross my arms over my breasts.

“Well, then my plan worked,” he laughs. “You aren’t thinking about what we have to do. I need you relaxed and calm.”

“I am,” I insist.

“I know you are now.”

We’re quiet again for an exit or two until he looks over at me.

“You know that when this is over, it’ll end any chance you have at reconciling with your family, right?”

“I know.” I consider his words and their meaning. He’s right. Maybe my brother will still speak to me, maybe, but my grandmother will never look at me again. A moment of sadness hits me. I wish Jeff didn’t depend so much on my family. He made bad choices and now has to work with my dad. He’s already told me that he needs the job and he isn’t brave like I am. Not to mention my father has essentially provided him with everything, making it seem impossible to ever leave. I wish things were different. I wish my brother would leave. But I know that’s not realistic.

While I know I’ll never reconcile with my family, the fact that I’m the one closing the door on it is still a bitter pill to swallow. I’ll never speak to my father again. And after my mother tried to tell me it was my fault, I’ve written her off too, but knowing that I might lose the last two family members that speak to me is hard to accept.

His thumb rubs my hand. "I'm sorry. I wish there was another way...unless you don't want to do this." He looks over at me, his eyes dart to the exit sign in front of us. This is my one and only out. He studies me carefully as I make a decision on the course of my life over only a few seconds.

"I'm going with you," I whisper. If my family can't accept me for doing right, then they were never meant to be my family.

"OK," he replies quietly as though he's considering it as well.

"What about you?"

He laughs bitterly. "Vivienne, my family is already dead to me. My father's relationship with me is purely business. He closed the door on a future with me when he sacrificed my mother for his own personal gain. He played Russian roulette and lost, and he has to live with that. I don't. I'm done living with the ghosts of his past."

"I'm sorry he made that decision," I say quietly as the first signs of the city emerge on the horizon in front of us.

"So am I, Vivienne, so am I."

"Can I ask you a question?" I pause. "Not as a journalist."

"OK," he says slowly.

"Why do I feel like you always were looking for a way out? Like you took the vow because you felt like you had to, but the second you did, you started planning your exit plan."

"You see a lot, curious cat."

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

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“Yes. I did what I had to do, what was expected of me. I knew that...well, being my father’s son, I needed to protect myself, otherwise, I would just be his next collateral damage. That’s what initially brought the three of us together. We loathed our fathers. And we all had lost someone we loved. We always knew we’d someday find a way to bring them down. It was always a long game. We just didn’t know how it would end.”

“Wait? You were always going to bring down your dads?” I don’t know why I’m surprised by this admission, but I am.

“Yes. We just never contemplated taking down the brotherhood with them.”

“But...aren’t there more. I mean, TOD is a national fraternity, and they have new members all the time. Aren’t you just going to cut off a leg and the body will regrow it somewhere else? Like Hydra.” I motion to his tattoo. “Can we really take the brotherhood down?” Doubt creeps into my mind. We’re attempting the impossible. I look over at Conner. Just a few weeks ago, I loathed this man, and now I’m about to burn down one of the oldest secret societies in my country with him. We’re risking it all, together.

I shake my head at the craziness of it all.

“What?”

“How could I have been so wrong about you?”

“I feel like we’ve had this conversation before,” he muses with a slight chuckle as he

turns off the interstate, but this time at a different exit than our previous trip.

“We have,” I whisper as the air in the car seems to grow thin. We’re really doing this. I’ve done plenty of semi-dangerous things in my life, but this...well, it takes the cake, and the entire kit and kaboodle. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a back way onto the property. Once”—he pauses and looks over at me—“when I was a delinquent teenager, my friends and I broke onto the property so we could target practice.”

“Uh, didn’t anyone hear you?”

He shrugs. “We managed to fire off a few rounds before the security guys started circling.”

I shake my head. “That was stupid.”

“We were stupid,” he agrees. “Anyhow, I assume we can still get through there. I guess we’ll find out. I wish we’d had more time to plan.”

He pulls over behind an abandoned warehouse several blocks from his father’s property. He looks over at me.

“Why are we doing this again?” I ask, half joking.

“Because we can’t trust anyone else and we need to know,” he answers as he opens the car door. I follow suit and we walk quietly to the corner of the building. He turns to me once we are flush against the old brick. And without warning, he leans down, grasps my face in his hands, and crashes his lips to mine. I moan into his mouth as his tongue caresses mine. My hands fly to his waist. My eyes close, and I take a minute to feel him. His kiss leaves me breathless as I pull back.

“What was that for?”

He presses his forehead against mine. “For fucking up and for good luck.”

“You’re forgiven. And we need all the luck we can get,” I mutter.

He smiles and leans down to kiss me gently once more. “OK, let’s do this.”

He takes my hand and I follow as we walk around a maze of buildings. He points out some cameras as we walk along in the shadows. When we reach the edge of the property, he turns to me.

“Whatever happens, if I say run, you run. Don’t look back. Don’t wait for me. Understand?”

“What happened to leave no man behind?” I murmur as I look at what appears to be a slight bend in a fence where it connected flush to a building once upon a time, but now the building has started to lean. The building is on the neighboring property, which is probably why it hasn’t been fixed. A part of me wonders why Sterling Corporation doesn’t just buy it.

“I mean it,” he says as he tugs my hand and brings it to his lips.

“I’m not leaving you,” I reply. I feel my lip tremble slightly as I say the words, partly because I mean them and partly because I’m scared as fuck right now.

He pulls me against him and rests his head on top of mine. I wrap my arms around his waist. Neither of us moves. “How did this happen?” he whispers as he kisses the top of my head.

“What?”

“How did I fall for you already?”

I pull back and look up at him, stunned.

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He grins at me. "Speechless? That's a new one for my curious cat."

"You choose right now to profess your love for me? Are you shitting me?" I grumble.

His grin widens. "I think it's the perfect time."

I roll my eyes. "Of course, you do, because even though I love you, you're still a giant asshole."

"I am, but I'm your giant asshole now," he says as he leans down again and kisses me passionately once more. This time I give in to his kiss until I hear his phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulls it out and groans. "For fuck's sake..." He trails off as he types a reply. "Aiden needs to chill the fuck out. Also, here's a photo of what they think we are looking for." He shows me his phone.

"Got it. Too bad we're doing this on the fly. It'd be a lot better if we could have all the fun spy gear," I point out.

"That it would, but this will have to do," he says, holding up his phone.

"OK, what now?" I look toward the fence and take a deep breath because I know what's coming and I need to steel myself for the task.

"See that." He points out where giant cranes are removing things from a ship.

"They are still unloading. So, do we wait?" I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nope. That’s the last cargo ship of the day. But it’s nearly unloaded. We are going to start over here and work our way across. You’ll need to stick close to me because he has at least a crew of five security guys walking around out there at any given time.”

“Five!” My eyes grow big. “You’re saying one of five men could find us at any given time?”

He winks at me. “Did I ever tell you about my granny?”

I groan. “Conner, now is not the time to reminisce about family members.”

“She was blind.”

“Great, now let’s focus.”

He leans toward me. “I learned how to use my ears instead of my eyes when I was with her.”

“Wonderful, I hope those superpowers help us because we’re going to need everything we have.”

Nodding and giving my hand a squeeze, he holds the fence for me. “Stick close.”

“I’m insane,” I mutter as I crawl through and wait for him to follow. Once we’re on the other side, he looks both ways and motions for me to trail behind him. We make it to an area filled with rows of shipping containers.

“This is where they leave the empty ones. But it will provide us with good cover. We need to get to the far side, over where we parked before because that’s where he’s keeping refrigerated containers. The container would be marked based on the owner’s

code. We have that information for Confervo and for my father's company. It would be one or the other."

I grab Conner's arm. "Are you kidding me? That's like a third of a mile away."

"Trust me," he whispers. I want to trust him, but this entire thing is insane. It's like we're trying to overthrow an entire empire with a stick and a rock. I follow him because, at this point, I'm committed to seeing it through, even if that means the end for us. I push the morbid thoughts from my mind as we run between cargo containers. The wind whips off the Patapsco River causing me to shiver.

We eventually get to an area where I can hear people yelling. It's the workers unloading the ship. The area has less cover and more lights. Not good.

"Now what?" I whisper as I stand behind Conner and crane my neck around him to see beyond us.

He pulls out his phone. "Bryce, I need your help. Can you kill the lights for about thirty seconds at the main loading dock? Thanks. I owe you."

He turns to me and grabs my hand. "When I say run, we run."

He barely has the words out of his mouth when all the lights go dark.

"Run," he whispers. And we take off sprinting. I have to pump my legs as fast as I can to keep up with him. He weaves us around machinery and a front loader. We manage to get to the other side and are safely tucked back between more cargo containers when the lights turn back on, and the workers start loudly talking to each other.

He weaves us around one and stops abruptly. I can hear a man, he's not more than

twenty feet away. Conner pushes me back, and we plaster our bodies against the side of the cargo container.

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“Any idea what happened?” the man asks into a microphone on his uniform.

“No. Could just be a power glitch. I’m having the system checked now.”

“Ten-four,” he says as he walks right past the aisle where we are and continues on toward the river.

I feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins as we cautiously make our way past these containers to a more open area filled with refrigerated containers. Even if we find a container with the proper markings, we’ll have to get inside and look for boxes containing the vials. My heart sinks at the near impossibility of finding what we’re looking for amongst all of these containers.

“Now what?” I ask as I look up at the containers that are stacked two stories high.

“We start here and work our way back,” Conner states as he looks up and down the row.

We continue walking, row after row, pausing with each little sound. We pass one more guard and continue. The minutes turn into an hour and then another.

When we reach the last row, Conner slams a fist into his thigh in frustration. “Damn it!” he whisper-yells.

He pulls his phone out. “It’s not here,” he mutters.

“I don’t know. It’s just not here. Yeah, we’ll make our way back over there.” He

hangs up and looks at me. But an idea has me grabbing his arm.

“What?” he asks.

“Does your dad transport anything else that’s valuable, like really valuable?”

“I guess.”

“No, like precious gems or stuff like that?” I ask.

“Shit, I don’t know, Vivienne. I have no clue what he transports nowadays.”

I nudge him and point to a building. There’s a guard standing out in front of it.

“If I had something that I didn’t want anyone to find, I’d keep it well protected, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s my dad’s office. I mean, in the rare times he actually is here,” Conner grumbles.

“Sounds like a good place for illegal drugs.”

“He’s not going to keep them in there.”

“Why not? You just said he’s never here. He has it protected. For what purpose? Something has to be there,” I point out as I motion again to the building.

“Well, even so, if I take out that guard...there’ll be hell to pay.”

I freeze. “What do you mean, take out the guard? Would you actually kill him?” My eyes widen and Conner steps us back against a row of barrels boarding the containers.

“If killing that man over there meant protecting you, I absolutely would do it without any reservations.”

“Awww...chivalry isn’t dead after all,” I say, my voice laced with sarcasm. “No need to murder a man. I have an idea.”

“No,” Conner states.

“No? You don’t even know what the idea is.”

“No. Just the answer is no.”

“Too bad. We need in there. Once I distract the guard, get in there and see if there’s anything we need. I’ll meet you back at the car,” I say as I run over to the fence closest to us that runs along the back of the building where the guard is standing. I scale it quickly, doing my best to not get caught by the barbed wire. Lucky for me, we had both fences and barbed wire on the horse farm growing up, so I’m capable of climbing over it without cutting the shit out of myself. I start running and then fall and cry out in pretend pain.

And like a fucking charm, the guard sprints to the side of the building and sees me.

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“Miss, are you OK?” he says. I want to roll my eyes because this giant brute is an idiot, and even I can tell that here in the pitch-black street.

“Ouch! I think I sprained my ankle,” I cry as I grab it and roll on the ground.

“Uh, here, let me see,” he says.

“Oh, no, don’t touch it! It hurts,” I moan.

“Do you have a phone? Can you call someone? Do you need an ambulance?” he asks as he crouches down. I look past him for a second and see Conner enter the building.

Now, I just need to keep him distracted long enough for Conner to search around, and then I can say I think I’ll be fine and call myself a car. Or at least, that’s the plan.

Chapter21

Conner

The only lightsinside come from the lights surrounding the offloading dock. I know this area is filled with motion-sensing cameras. Vivienne was right, night vision goggles would be a great addition to this mission right now. I keep low and look around. It looks just like a normal office building. My father’s office is beyond a door at the far end of the room. I make my way along the ground, dodging and weaving as I notice different motion sensors. I can hear Vivienne outside making quite the distraction. Stupid woman! She’s liable to get us killed.

I reach the far side of the room and look at the door to my father's office and the one to a storage closet. Where would he hide it?

I try to think like my father, cunning and deceptive.

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer," he always said. My intellect tells me to try the storage closet, but my gut says to go to my father's office. I crawl along the wall and try the doorknob. It's locked, of course.

I grin. My father didn't teach me to love, but he sure as fuck taught me to steal. I pull out a tool I always keep on my key chain and pick the lock. I look for sensors, but aside from the motion sensors, I don't see anything. He's seldom here, so it's likely he doesn't employ all the high-tech security he does at his city offices. Also, a decaying building in an industrial lot in the harbor doesn't exactly scream for security breach likely. No one would look here for anything, except maybe a dead washed-up body.

Holding my breath, I slowly push the door open once the lock clicks. I peek inside. I see his desk, a few chairs, and some file cabinets. Nothing looks out of place. I see zero motion sensors inside the room, which doesn't surprise me. He wouldn't want someone hacking in here and seeing what goes on when he is here. But why was a guard stationed here while he isn't on the premises? My nerves are frayed, and I know whatever I'm looking for has to be in here.

I crawl into the room and look around again. Where would he hide a refrigerated box of drugs in here?

I text Aiden as a realization dawns on me.

Me: If the drug isn't in a box, then what would I be looking for?

I watch the three little dots appear on my screen. Come on, Dr. Jekyll, I say to myself. We always called Aiden Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He can come off as a typical nice guy one second, and then a total badass fucker the next.

Aiden: It would likely be in small vials, like this.

He texts a photo and I look at it and groan. They are small and could fit in the palm of my hand. That shit could be anywhere. With a refrigerated container, we had a chance, with a small vile, the odds are definitely not in my favor.

I sit back against the wall. I can still hear Vivienne outside. I need her to keep up the act as long as possible. But mostly, I need her to be safe, which means I need to hurry the fuck up and get the hell out of here.

My eyes have adjusted to the shadowy room, giving me the ability to make out more objects that appear in various shades of black and gray in the darkness. Something catches my eye and I get up and walk to a wall unit along the back of the room. Running my fingers along the handle of a cigar humidor the size of a cabinet, memories bubble to the surface.

“Get me a cigar,” my father commanded. I was maybe fourteen and home from school because I had been running a fever, but my father made me come with him, telling me to “man up.”

I open the door and retrieve an old wooden box and open it, surprised to find five cigars and a gold watch. I shut the humidity and temperature controlled cabinet as I look at the box’s contents again.

“Dad?” I asked, holding up the watch.

“Leave it. My friends don’t always know when to stop. I like to keep souvenirs to

remind them. Now, bring the cigar,” he demanded.

The watch, what was it about the watch. I try to remember but the memory fades just as fast as it surfaced. I open the cabinet and pull out the box. Jackpot! That motherfucker is so fucking predictable! I’m surprised this hasn’t gotten him killed. But lucky for me, he doesn’t often change his ways.

I find a dozen vials in the bottom beneath six cigars. I lean under his desk and take photos, hoping no one will see the flashes. Then I take one vial and wrap it in a tissue before placing it in my pocket.

Me: Got it.

Aiden: Get the hell out of there.

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I slowly place the box back where I found it and begin to retrace my steps. It's quiet outside and I wonder if Vivienne had to bail on me. I want to call her but am afraid I'll blow her cover. I take a calming breath and move slowly and carefully. I hear voices outside and pause at the door. The voices get farther away after a few seconds. I cautiously crack the door open. There are two guys walking toward the loading dock and no sign of the security detail that was outside this office. I'm not sure if that's a good sign or a bad sign, I do know that I need to get back to the car. I don't hear Vivienne and I can't see her out on the street any longer.

I head back along the office wall. There's one large open space and I need to clear it to get back to the far side and the cargo containers that give me cover. I see one camera up high. I follow its view.

I pull out my phone and make a call.

"Bryce," I say when he picks up.

"For fuck's sake, you owe me double this month."

"Triple it. I need you to hack my father's security camera. I need to bypass it."

"Christ almighty. OK. Give me two minutes."

"I don't have two minutes. Make it happen now."

"Don't test me, Conner," he growls as he hangs up. I try not to smirk. I'm tall and scary, but Bryce Gallagher is taller and scarier. I'd love to know his backstory.

I count the seconds as they pass, keeping an eye out for anyone coming this way. There are only four containers left on the ship. Pretty soon, the guys will be coming back this way. I need to be out of here.

The seconds tick by, and just as my phone buzzes with an incoming message, I see a car's headlights coming onto the property from the main road. Shit. I can't make out who it is, but an unscheduled visit by anyone down here at this hour isn't a good thing.

I check my phone and see a thumbs-up from an unknown caller. Looking both ways, I walk across the open space as if I belong there. I glance toward the loading dock, but the guys down there are busy with a container. I close my eyes and listen. I can hear footsteps. I open my eyes and look the other way just as a man steps out from behind some cargo containers. I hold my breath as I quicken my pace.

He looks toward the loading dock. I'm walking faster, nearly running as I catch his head start to turn, but I'm saved when he pulls out his phone to answer a call. I make it to the nearest cargo container and lean against the side of it to breathe for a moment before continuing onward.

I weave in and out of the containers, quickly making my way back to the fence. I want to call Vivienne, but I don't know if she's safely alone yet. I'm most definitely going to fuck some sense into her when I see her. I'm so angry that she ran off and did that. She has no idea how dangerous this situation is. We're risking everything. But she acted recklessly. There could have been another way had we taken five seconds to think it through.

I'm so close now. The paths are becoming darker. I can see the fence up ahead. The neighboring property is lit by only one security light on the far side. Granger Delcroy wouldn't sell his property to my father if he needed the money to save his own life. Their rivalry goes back farther than my own life. I just know when Delcroy closed his

shipping business, Dad tried to buy his property, but he refused, instead he let it decay. I often wonder what else transpired between them that he'd let his property turn into a wasteland of drug users and squatters instead of taking money from my father.

He keeps one security camera on, but it's pointed on the other side of the building toward Dad's office.

I bend down to slink through the fence opening when I hear someone behind me. I freeze and crouch lower.

"Anyone back there?" a voice calls out.

I quickly move behind a stack of wooden crates. I see a light shine to where I was a moment ago.

"Nope. It's clear back here," another voice replies as the light moves away from me. I need to get out of here now. Whatever is going on here, has me wanting to get as far from it as possible.

I crouch down and head back to the fence, wedging myself through the space and onto Delcroy's property. My heart is racing as I head toward the car. I don't see anyone near it from the long distance across the lot and that has me worrying that something has gone very wrong with Vivienne. I decide to stay against the wall of the building, remaining in the shadows. I wedge myself between an old wooden post and the brick façade. I pull out my phone again. No messages.

I peer around the wood post at the car in the distance. I pulled it to the side of a small building. There are a few other cars out that way, most of them without tires and sitting on cinder blocks. One was burned out long ago, only the metal exterior remains. Yet, the car we drove here looks intact.

I message Bryce again.

Me: Can you check the video footage across the street from Delcroy's property? I want to make sure no one messed with the car.

I wait for a reply, keeping a lookout for Vivienne.

Unknown: Clear. Where's Vivienne?

Shit. If Bryce noticed her absence too, then shit is not good. I look at the car and then back toward the road. I should go, but not without Vivienne.

Chapter22

Vivienne

“Are you sure you're OK?”the man asks one final time as he stands and holds out his hand to help me up. I tentatively take it.

“Y-yes,” I stammer.

He looks around us and scratches his head. “What the hell is some uppity lady like you doing out here by yourself. You do know this is not a safe part of the city, right?”

I shrug. “I’m new to the area. I guess I was so busy jogging that I didn’t really pay attention to my surroundings.”

“Lady, this is the city, not some suburb. You need to get the hell out of here. Go that way until you get to a streetlight and then turn left. Don’t stop until you see a gas station. Call a car to pick you up from there. It’s a hell of a lot safer to wait there than here and I don’t have the time to babysit you.”

“Right. Uh, sorry about that. I should be more careful about where I’m going. I head that way, right?” I point toward the nearest intersection.

“Lights. Left. Gas station. Can you remember that?”

I nod. “I think so. Uh, thanks again.”

He shakes his head and walks back onto the property.

I let out a long breath. I look toward the building but don’t see anything inside of it. Did he get it? Did he get out of there?

I tried to fake examining my ankle for as long as possible, but I have no idea if he’s still inside. I begin to realize my plan was stupid. I should call him, but what if he’s

somewhere where he can't talk or his phone vibrates and someone hears it. If we make it out of here, he's going to kill me.

I start walking in the wrong direction in case the guy is watching me. I see a car turn onto the street and on instinct I step against a nearby building as the car approaches. It's black with tinted windows and I can't tell who's inside. The gate to the Sterling Corporation property opens and the car goes inside.

Something about it seems off. The car is nice, too nice for someone visiting at night. But it definitely does not belong to Theo Sterling, unless he got a new car. I snap a quick photo with my phone, hoping it's light enough by the building that I can read the license plate later.

I need to get out of here. I turn to start toward the property where we parked, hiding the best I can in the dark shadows of the nearby buildings on this otherwise deserted road. I can see the car now. And standing next to it, barely visible in the shadows is the outline of a man who is most definitely pissed and most definitely going to hand me my ass in a moment.

I look both ways and cross the street as far away from a streetlight as I can.

When I approach him alongside an old burned-out car, I can see that his arms are crossed and he's glaring at me.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he hisses. "I had Bryce checking the street surveillance for you. Aiden is freaking out. He's sent me at least six text messages in the last two minutes." He motions to a camera near the road.

"I got here as fast as I could. A car pulled in," I explain as I wave my hand toward his father's property.

“I know, I saw it, too.” He looks over at the property. I can see the concern on his face.

“Did you...” I trail off as I look at him, afraid to speak the words as if that might curse us.

He reaches into his pocket and holds up a vial. “I believe I have.”

I grin. His lips start to twitch into a smile but then he frowns and looks down at me in a way that has my body shivering and my panties melting all at once. He steps forward, and I step back until I’m pinned between him and the car.

“Get in the fucking car now,” he growls. “Don’t think I’m not ready to tan that luscious ass of yours.”

I roll my eyes and push past him. Once we’re inside, he looks over at me. “Don’t ever do that again,” he growls as he reaches for me and pulls my face to his. But he isn’t scaring me, if anything, I’m turned the fuck on right now. Maybe it’s the adrenaline, or maybe I just need this man in an irrational way that I don’t want to make sense of now or ever.

I unbuckle my seat belt and crawl onto his lap as he pushes the chair back. Our hands become frenzied, seeking a release for our emotions and adrenaline. I find his zipper and free his erection. Cursing, I manage to get my yoga pants down around my knees. He pulls my panties to the side, and I slam down onto his cock.

“Fuck,” he groans as I start to ride him. His hand snakes up my shirt, pushing beneath my sports bra to cup my breast, his fingers finding my nipple. I can feel myself growing wetter, our bodies gliding against each other as I quicken the pace. I need this release and I know he does too. We need the connection, the physical connection. I can’t explain it because, mostly, it doesn’t make sense, yet it’s as if we understand

each other on a cellular level.

He lifts his pelvis, meeting each of my movements with a thrust of his own. We're chasing our highs now, sprinting to the finish line. Our lips meet and then trail off to attack more skin. His tongue slides along my jawline and he nips at my earlobe. Dear God! I never want this feeling to end. I'll never get enough of this man, this enigma of a man. I'm not attracted to him because of his wealth. I never would be. Coming from wealth, it doesn't have the allure it does for those without it. I see it as a curse. I'd take Conner even if he had not a single penny to his name. As I ride him, our eyes lock, and I feel like I'm flying through a galaxy, seeing stars being born, watching suns with solar flares erupting, and dodging asteroids. There's so much more to him than I ever expected. He's damaged, just like I am. And because of that, he sees me. He understands me in a way no one ever has. And right now, I swear he's looking into my soul. We gaze at each other as our bodies move faster, our needs continuing to spiral. I try to keep my eyes open, not wanting to break this connection, a connection I've never once felt before during sex or otherwise. My eyelids droop as I reach my climax. But his thumb on my bottom lip has my eyes opening just a crack as my body tenses.

"That's it. Watch me while you come on my cock," he murmurs. He starts thrusting harder and deeper. I grind against him, seeking the last bit of friction I need before my body lets loose and my mouth drops open in a silent cry. I feel myself trembling, my inner muscles clamping around him. He grunts once as he buries himself deep inside of me and holds my hips so that I'm completely impaled by him.

I feel myself start to relax. The tension from what we just did slowly leaves my body as our eyes refocus on each other.

"We need to leave now," he says after a second.

I nod and climb off him. We both adjust our clothes. For a few moments, the car is

filled with silence aside from our breathing as we both look forward past the lot filled with old barrels, pieces of wood, and rotting cars to the river. The water has small waves that catch the light at the crest. I can hear it lapping against the dock.

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It's peaceful, almost serene as if we were anywhere else but here. I take a deep breath, wanting to say how I feel at this moment, but a tap at the window causes both of us to jump.

"It's just me," Aiden says as he leans down and looks at us.

"For fuck's sake," Conner mumbles as he turns on the car, which is silent thanks to the electric engine, and rolls down the window. "Are you trying to give us a heart attack?"

"No, are you trying to give me one? It's been ten minutes and you haven't answered a single damn text message," he growls as he holds up his phone.

Conner looks around. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Aiden cracks his neck and leans on the car. "I followed you and parked a few blocks away. This isn't exactly a great solo mission."

"Well, I didn't go solo, now did I?" Conner grabs my hand as to make a point but doesn't let go. I don't pull away. I like how it feels. I don't care that he's in control, not about this anyways.

"We need to get out of here. Why are you still here?" Aiden asks.

Conner glares at him and Aiden narrows his eyes. "Think with that brain of yours, the one up here, Pound," he mutters as he motions to Conner's head.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Aiden's right, but I love how pissed Conner is at the moment. Why does Conner being wound up make me want to jump him? I'm not sure I know the answer, but I don't care. Even though our lives may not be this exciting forever, I know any moment I spend with Conner Sterling will most definitely not be dull.

"We're leaving. You should, too," Conner says.

Aiden nods and glances over his shoulder at the Sterling property. "I saw headlights earlier."

"A car went in a few minutes ago. I didn't see who it was," I explain.

"Who would be here so late at night?" Aiden ponders as he keeps his eyes glued to the neighboring property, but we can't see the office or the loading area from where we are.

"It doesn't matter. I got the vial," Conner states as he holds it out to Aiden. Aiden picks it up and holds it up to the light, examining it. "I'll need to take this to Ella. She has better equipment to test this. I want to be absolutely sure."

"When will we know?" I ask, hoping he'll say tonight.

"A day, if she can rush it. The diagnostics take some time," he explains as he carefully places the vial in his pocket and then pats it as if to make sure it's really there.

We all look back at the Sterling property. The last container is being hoisted off the cargo ship. I can hear the yells of the men working the loading dock in the distance. I hear a door slam shut. Something about it makes me want to get out of here.

"Let's go," I say as I squeeze Conner's hand. He grips mine tightly, his fingers

weaving between mine. Even though I'm still scared and unsure of what tomorrow will bring, I feel comforted by his touch as if, together, we can do anything. I'm not sure what will happen, but I know now that I will not leave Conner. I know he won't leave me. We're in this together, until the end, whether it's a happy one or not.

"Yes, we should get out of here. I don't like that someone is here at night," Aiden agrees. Remembering my phone, I reach into my pocket and pull it out. "I got photos, just a second."

I pull up my photo app and then zoom in on the license plate, hoping beyond hope that it's not blurry. I fidget with the editor on the image, brightening it and sharpening it. It's not perfect but the tag number is readable.

"Here. Recognize it?" I ask them as I turn my phone around. Conner's eyes narrow as he thinks, but it's Aiden's eyes that have my breath catching. They widen and his face pales in the dim light of the parking lot.

"What?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"It's my father's car," he says as he looks at Conner.

"Are you sure?" Conner asks. "I don't remember him having a dark sedan."

"I'm positive. Because I was there when he bought it six months ago."

"Why is your father here? At night?" Conner ponders.

Aiden holds up the vial that was in his pocket. "I'm not sure I want to know the answer to that question, but I think we'll need to find out."

Conner squeezes my hand more tightly and brings it to his lips. The movement seems more to comfort himself than me.

We hear another door slam in the distance and then yelling.

“Shit, we need to get out of here now. Go! I’ll be right behind you,” Aiden says as he stuffs the vial back in his pocket and takes off running. Conner maneuvers us out of the parking lot. I can see headlights in the distance.

Conner’s hands tighten on the wheel. “Well, if it isn’t my father,” he mutters as his eyes connect with the car coming toward us.

Continue the story in A Man of Prestige.