



# Chasing Sophia

**Author:** Vikki Jay

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** My friends dared me to kiss her without revealing I'm the richest man in town.

This lie will become my biggest downfall, as she hates affluence with every fiber of her being.

The dare was simple. Kiss the girl in a red dress, who was sitting alone at an upscale restaurant. But the moment my lips touch hers and her palm hits my face, I forget about winning everything else but her.

She accuses me of being self-centered, rich, and entitled. Even though it's true, I'm more than that.

In my determination to show her that not every rich man is a bastard, I resort to a fake name and job.

Despite the lie, everything else that transpires between us is real.

Every touch, every kiss, every tender moment, has a promise of a lifetime.

But lies have short lives.

Will Sophia forgive me after finding out my truth?

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

ASHCROFT

“Acceptthat you’ve lost all your charm, Ash.” Jonathan’s heavy arm lands on my back as a playful gesture.

“I haven’t, and don’t hold your breath in wait of that acceptance.” I lean back, sipping the fine whiskey in The Queen’s Hall.

This building was an old city library built several decades back by a rich literary connoisseur. However, with time and inadequate upkeep, it was on the verge of finding a place beside other dilapidated sites in the soon-to-be demolished ledger at the city town hall.

It was my mother’s undying love for books that saved it from the imminent fall when my father purchased it. He restored it to a glory that left the initial owner speechless. It was no surprise when Dad named this grand hotel The Queen’s Hall, his nickname for my mother. Proving true to his fame as an astute and shrewd businessman, he renovated the interiors, and this place is no longer just a library awaiting random book seekers, but a meeting hub for the elites in St. Peppers.

The reading area on the ground floor is still open to the public during the day, but it’s at night when this place comes to life in the top three floors. Socialites and businessmen in their finest clothes parade around, enjoying a drink, striking business deals, or like me today, meeting long-lost friends. Though once again, I’m questioning why the hell I’m here.

“What are you thinking? Summoning the lost charmer who had the power to impress

women with a simple smirk?”

“I think you’ve forgotten who I am.” I pin Jonathan with a steely gaze that would make a common man squirm. But he wouldn’t be my friend if he’d back away so easily. “I’m willing to give you a demonstration right now and blow away the cobwebs of doubt that have covered your brain.”

After placing the glass, which is still a quarter full, onto the table, I get up from the leather bergère chair. A brief lull falls upon us when my six-five frame comes to its full height, and a second later, everything resumes. But it’s only a matter of days until everyone finds out who I really am, when they learn Ashcroft Miller is back in town, and this time for business. They might not recognize my face, as I was absent for the past ten years, but the name Miller holds a high stature in this town.

Jonathan’s voice breaks through my drifting thoughts. “You cannot tell her you’re Ashcroft Miller, the richest man in town, or share the fact that you are a veteran who’s medically retired. For some reason, chicks dig that story.”

“It isn’t a lie.” My voice is drier than the Sahara Desert.

“That gives you another advantage with the ladies, as if you’re hurting in that department.” Jonathan straightens and sharpness gleams in his gaze. I notice the shift in air. Suddenly, he seems determined to turn this lighthearted fun into a big challenge.

“So, what am I going to say? I’m a nameless, jobless creature wanting to go on a date with her?”

“No,” Mathew, who has been quiet all this time, pipes in. “Not just a date. You have to kiss her. Tonight.” Fuck. I’m outnumbered two against one. Never a good scene, especially with these two.

“Yeah,” Jonathan drawls. “It’ll be like old times. The three of us in a bar, trying to find dates for the weekend.”

“We were in our twenties then.” I fake a yawn. “Not thirty-one.”

“So you agree, your thirties aren’t suiting you as well as your twenties?”

“Hold that Cheshire grin, Jon. I’m not a canary you can swallow so easily.” And because I’m Ashcroft Miller, sole heir to one of the most powerful families in St. Peppers and someone who hasn’t learned the meaning of the word failure, I decide to indulge my friends like the good old days they’re obviously missing so much. “Who?”

They don’t blink an eye when I stick my hands inside my pockets. After giving me one last glance, they turn their heads around as I heave a sigh. I had planned to go home alone and read through the last few years’ finance records my executive assistant left on my desk earlier in the day, but now I’m stuck here for God only knows how long.

The air around me shifts, and I register the exact moment something captures my friends’ wandering gazes before they jerk their heads back at each other. My heart trips for the first time, and an odd sensation hits me.

Jonathan smirks. “Last chance, Ash. You can reconsider.”

“Have you ever known me to back away from a challenge?” The thumping in my chest is so loud that I’m sure my family doctor is going to have a field day tomorrow.

My friends look at each other smugly. “There’s a lady behind you in a red dress.” Mathew takes a dramatic pause, and I mumble a curse.

I'm going to rip their heads off if they try to fix me up with a twenty-something girl again, who's barely of legal drinking age and looks at the world with rose-colored glasses. Their desire to talk and know everything about me exhausts the hell out of me.

"Like I said, you have to kiss her." Mathew gives me a sardonic grin. "You can look at her now."

Asshole. As if I was waiting for his command.

But when I turn around and get a glimpse of the girl with platinum hair, my heart fucking stops. A voice echoes inside me that after tonight, my life isn't going to be the same. Before I can even recover from the lightning that just hit me, a swarm of black suits throng in through the door, separating us and block my view. I'm marching toward her, ignoring the chuckle of my friends.

2

SOPHIA

What the hell are you doing, Soph?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

My brain screams at me as I run my clammy hands over the dress Luna loaned me. Even my fanciest clothes aren't suitable for this hotel.

This isn't who you are. Paying someone for a date, really?

I'm trying hard to keep my inner critic in check, but it isn't easy. So, I try to reason with it and think of the last week's lunch with the New Year's Gala committee, where the top musicians from our town were invited. A few will be selected to perform at the event. I was shocked to receive the invitation letter, which explained how a series of informal meetings are planned, where the committee will get to know the participants well before they go into the shortlisting round.

I was looking forward to the luncheon all week, and not even for a second imagined it would be anything less than spectacular. But once again, my big mouth ruined everything. My tongue was possessed when, in response to Nicoleta's question of if I was single, I mentioned my boyfriend, who couldn't accompany me due to an unavoidable work situation.

A boyfriend that doesn't exist!

But hell if that fact stopped me from singing exquisite songs in praise of him—so much so that the head of the committee, Miss Tee, extended the invitation to next week's dinner party to spouses and partners.

In my defense, Nicoleta had provoked me, as always. Seeing us now, I can't believe there was a time when we were close. She was two years my junior at the In Tune Music Academy, and I often supported her whenever she struggled with assignments.

But then she joined the same music school where I teach, as a sub music teacher. I didn't even realize when our relationship dynamics changed from schoolmates to colleagues to rivals.

I close my eyes and like every day this past week, images of Nicoleta and her Italian boyfriend, Leonardo, flash before me. The way he charmed Miss Tee was both laudable and tacky.

No one's asking your opinion, Soph.

He knew what he was doing, and he was exceptionally great at it, if Miss Tee's scarlet face and girly laughter had anything to say.

"Are you ready to order, ma'am?" The sweet waiter visits my table once again. Not only the guests but even the servers are pretty in this place, as if being beautiful is one of the qualifying criteria for the job.

"I'm sorry. My... friend is running late," I whisper, and he gracefully nods and leaves.

Where the heck is Jeremy? It's fifteen minutes past eight. I straighten the strap of my watch and expectantly glance toward the entrance. Jeremy might not be European, but he's my only hope. He works for Luna's dad and from the pictures she has shown me, he is... neat.

Cropped hair. Lanky frame. I can at least joke with Miss Tee that I don't need any chairs to reach the top shelves.

My only grief is that I'll be shelling out my entire month's salary at this dinner, because that's what Jeremy asked in exchange of accompanying me as my fake boyfriend to Miss Tee's party. The Queen's apparently has the best holiday menu.

My eyes light up at the sight of a familiar face, as if it's not Jeremy but Robert De Niro himself walking toward me.

"Hi. Sophia, right?" he asks and before I can nod, he pulls out a chair and flops down. I told him I'd carry the paperback of *Little Women* so he didn't have to search around for me, and I guess that helped.

Proving he is nothing but professional, Jeremy doesn't even ask how I'm doing and straight away waves at the waiter.

I follow his movement before a deep voice brushes my skin. "Leave."

My head jerks up, and I come face to face with the most beautiful man I've ever seen. My heart skips a beat as I take in the dark whiskey eyes, sharp nose, and perfect chin. A face carved by the gods, or perhaps he's an incarnation of Adonis himself.

My shallow breathing has almost stopped, and I blame it on the lack of oxygen in my brain when I spot, after several beats, him gripping Jeremy's collar.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I practically shout. "Leave him alone!"

"You know this guy?" The stranger stares down at me. His jaw is clenched so tightly that I can almost hear his teeth grinding.

"What's your problem, man? I'm her date." All of Jeremy's attempts to get out of that tight hold end up in vain.

"I don't think so." The low warning in the stranger's voice pulses in my veins. As much as my heart unexpectedly rattles like a wild animal in a cage, I'm not liking his actions, especially with the way he's gathering attention from the neighboring tables.



“Sophia, I only agreed to be your fake date because you were desperate.” Jeremy’s pale face turns more pallid by the second. “I’ve no interest in dealing with your jealous ex, or whoever he is.”

“He is not—” The rest of my words don’t get a chance to see the light of day, as Jeremy takes a step toward the door as soon as the stranger’s grip loosens.

Panic squeezes my lungs as I watch my last hope slipping out of the ostentatious but beautifully decorated hall. I grab my purse and scamper off in hopes of catching up to Jeremy. I’ve just stepped out, no Jeremy in sight, when someone grabs my arm. Lightning sizzles inside me as I turn around to face the same stranger.

“He isn’t worth your time.”

I hold back the uncharacteristic slew of hate words forming in my brain. “What... Why... Who?” I struggle with which question to voice first.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“You are better off without a man who doesn’t even stand for his girl and scurries like a rat at the first sight of conflict,” he carelessly drawls, as if he has done me a huge service and not otherwise, causing irritation to flare inside me.

“I’m not his girl, you idiot. You don’t know what you’ve done.” My throat chokes as I stare ahead, hoping for Jeremy to return, at least for the food. I can convince him to be my fake date again. I’m sure of it.

“Then join me inside. We’ll start afresh and you can tell me why a pretty girl like you needs a fake date. And maybe you’ll find a better prospect.”

I’m lost for words. Just after sending my date packing, he has the gall to invite me for dinner.

I’m not a short girl by any measure. My five feet eight inches have given my fellow classmates enough occasions to call me by the nickname giraffe. But this man makes me feel short. His black tux isn’t loaned like my clothes. The phrase well fitted has lost its meaning. It seems someone sewed the suit on him. My stomach flips when my gaze returns to his face. A knowing smile and an arched eyebrow adorn his face. The words entitled and cocky are written all over him, from his neat hair to his shiny Oxfords.

“Let me guess, that prospect would be you?”

“If you think so, I can volunteer my services.”

Anger and pleasure mingle together, leaving me restless and jittery. I’m still staring at

him when his head jerks toward the hall.

His lips purse into a thin line, but due to his towering height, I'm unable to look beyond him and identify what caused that smile to slip before he says, "Let me make it easier for you." I don't get a chance to understand his words as he dips his head and cups my face, his lips landing over mine.

In a flash, he does make it easier. Anger surges, drowning pleasure in its wake. I step back and leave, but not before my palm meets his beautiful face.

3

ASHCROFT

"I asked for the complete list. How hard can it fucking be?"

"This is the complete guest list from that night, Mr. Miller." My executive assistant, Larry, glances at the pages spread out on my desk. "I've spoken to the hotel manager, sir. He assured me there is no mistake."

"Are you trying to tell me we no longer care who gets an entry into the most elite and exclusive hotel? Because the name I'm searching for isn't here." I grind my teeth together. When Larry's chin lowers to his chest, incompetence etched all over his pale face, I know he's of no more help to me. "Get me the manager of The Queen's. I want to see him in person"

I make a mental note: find my fiery fairy first, and fire Larry next.

"I'll call him right now, sir, and explain the whole situation," Larry says before closing my office door behind him.

Two hours later, the manager who doesn't look a day older than me, is sitting in my office.

“Mr. Miller, I apologize if my staff made a mistake.” The strong voice of the man gives me some hope. He's dressed in a conventional dress code of black suit, white shirt, and black tie. Even though he's shorter than me, he has a presence that cannot easily be ignored. I'm sure he's often confused with one of the high-paying guests at The Queen's.

“The guest list.” I point toward the paper on my table. It's been two days now, and with every passing second, a foreign fear grows that she's slipping away from me. No fucking way. “It's missing a name.” My voice comes out as a growl, but it doesn't deter the manager.

“I can personally assure you that everyone who made a booking that night has their name on this list, Mr. Miller.”

“So did I imagine her? Do you think I'm hallucinating, Mr. Manager?”

His shoulders push back with a hint of displeasure at my stern voice, hinting he wasn't always in the hospitality business. “Sir, it isn't uncommon for ladies to not give their real name to... unfamiliar gentlemen.”

“Believe me, it was a real name.” Because she hadn't given it to me. Her fake date had called her by that name—Sophia. A name that has haunted my last two nights, and the bluest of blue eyes that have pervaded my every waking moment.

“If I may ask, did you meet her at the bar or a table?”

I'm quiet, waiting for him to explain more.

“Whenever a booking request comes in, we attach it to a table, making sure we’re never overbooked. We might be able to find the name used for the booking.”

Hope peeks out from behind my exhaustion. “I can show you the table. Right now.”

A flare of surprise sparks in his eyes, but he recovers quickly. “Very well, sir.” He follows me as I march out of my office, and we take the elevator.

“What’s your name?” I ask as the manager matches my stride in the parking lot of my office building.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“William, sir.”

I get into the driver’s seat of my McLaren, and once William shuts the passenger door, I expertly steer us throughout the streets of St. Peppers. “You knew who I was at The Queen’s that night,” I state. “Why didn’t your staff treat me as such?”

“When the king decides to stroll through the town, you don’t blow his disguise.”

I chuckle, feeling lighter for the first time in the past two days. “Looking at you, I wouldn’t have guessed there was a funny bone in you.”

“I’m a man of many talents, Mr. Miller.” There’s a serious lilt in his voice despite the lighthearted words. “The town’s wealthiest man walks into his hotel, and not a single person blinks an eye? People don’t flock around him offering favors? I assumed there was a reason for the secrecy.”

“I’m sure word has gotten around that I’ve taken medical retirement from the military.” I raise an eyebrow, and William nods without pulling his gaze away from the street. “Just enjoying some calm before fully immersing myself into the civilian life. So, was it hard for you?” When he doesn’t reply, I add, “Getting back into the civilian life?”

Looking at the control and finesse with which William carries himself, I’ve guessed by now that he was in the military.

“It depends what you’re looking for, sir. I desperately wanted some normalcy. I took the plunge into this slow, calm life with my whole heart.”

“My father hired you, didn’t he?” One of my dad’s greatest skills was to surround himself with only the most loyal staff, something I definitely didn’t inherit, given Larry’s incompetence.

“As a matter of fact, it was your mother, sir.”

Sorrow twists my insides and snakes around my chest. It’s been almost a decade since my parents’ death in a car crash, but with my return to St. Peppers, their memories are becoming more and more frequent.

“She was at the hospital on one of her visits. I was lying on the bed, injured and broken, with no place and no one to go to. She found out that I like reading, so she started reading to me. She said I reminded her of you.” William is quiet abruptly, and after a beat’s pause, he clears his throat and adds, “I hope I didn’t overstep, sir.”

I shake my head. “I know my mother. She was the kindest person on earth.”

“She was indeed. She gave me the job at the library, but then a few weeks later your father offered me the position as hotel manager.” William’s every word drips with gratitude, and then we fall into silence.

Once we reach the hotel and I show him the table, it takes less than a few minutes for William to find me the name and address of the person who made the booking, but it doesn’t make any sense.

The table was booked by one Louis Durant. No Sophia. No fucking Jeremy.

It takes me another day to link the famous Durant Wine family with my firecracker, and soon I’m standing outside the music school where she teaches.

SOPHIA

“He kissed you? On your lips?” Luna squeals when I give her a hesitant nod. “Wow.”

“Don’t romanticize it. I’m not at all pleased about it.”

Liar, my brain retorts, but I ignore it.

Even if I haven’t accepted it out loud, I haven’t been able to forget the feel of his lips on mine. In just a fraction of a second, he branded me. His touch lit every fiber in my body. I remember his thumb against my cheek and the way my heart galloped. How I managed to walk away from him is still a mystery to me.

“And you slapped him?”

I nod once again, pleasure skirting away and leaving embarrassment in its wake. I might be outspoken, but I’m not a violent person by nature. In fact, I took part in a parade against emotional violence in the workplace in the town’s square last month.

Hypocrite, my inner critic hollers.

But I blame my actions on the loss of consciousness his kiss had bestowed upon me.

“Who was he exactly?” Luna asks as she collects my things from the table and slides them into my bag. Yeah, I lose track of everything when I’m thinking about... the kiss. The burnt pot of breakfast oatmeal from this morning is more proof of that.

“Some jerk.” I shake my head. Yeah, I should hate him. He kissed me for God’s sake, took something that was mine to give. I’m not the shiny right breast of Juliet’s statue in the town square that anyone can touch as they please. “And I have no desire of ever seeing him again.” Something akin to disappointment pulls at my chest, but I’m



determined to ignore it.

Fraud.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

Go away, brain. You don't know a thing about me.

"So what will you do now?" Luna asks thoughtfully.

I shrug, because I'm out of options and the time is ticking. Tomorrow night, I have to be at Miss Tee's with my handsome, amazing boyfriend. "Maybe I'll tell her that I lied." My heart deflates and hope of ever performing at the New Year's Gala evaporates.

"I think it'll work out. When God closes a door, he always opens a window."

I smile at Luna's perpetual optimism. If she wasn't so sweet, I might even be jealous of her. She has the luxury to be optimistic in life. I'm sure if one door closes for her, multiple windows spring open. My abhorrence of the wealthy doesn't extend to Luna. I'm sure she's an anomaly. Her volunteering at school three days a week is proof of that. Not many rich women would do that.

As we get out of the school's building, frigid air hits my cheeks, and I tighten the wool scarf around my neck.

"It's cold, Soph. Shall we drive you?" We stop where Luna's driver is waiting for her.

I shake my head with a smile at her offer, which she makes every time, whether I'd be facing heat, cold, wind, or traffic.

After waving her a goodbye and watching her car leave, I've taken a step toward the

bus stop, when I hear my name from behind.

“Sophia, right?”

Hairs at the back of my neck rise at a voice I’m trying to forget, though it has pervaded my thoughts every night.

“No,” I whisper to myself and hurry my footsteps. “I’m imagining this.”

“Sophia, wait.”

I lose my balance at the way my name rolls off his lips, and he gets right in my face.

“I’m trying to talk to you,” he says.

God, he’s handsome. I didn’t imagine that mole over his lip in my dreams; it’s really there. I take a deep breath, trying to get out of the stupor, but all I inhale is his rich cologne.

A gust of icy wind whips through, making me shiver, and I find my voice again. “And I’m trying to ignore you. Now, let me go.” My teeth chatter. “I’ve lost enough because of you. I don’t want to miss my bus too.”

I try to skirt past him, but he shifts, his big broad frame halting my every attempt. My nostrils flare when his lips twitch in amusement. This man has some effing nerves.

“Listen, mister, it seems like no one taught you any manners, so here’s a news flash. When someone asks you to leave them alone, you leave them freaking alone.”

“And what do you do when you want to befriend someone?”

“Befriend?” Did he really say that? “What gave you the impression I would even for a second consider being your friend?”

He starts to open that gorgeous mouth, which I now know gives hot kisses, when I stretch my hands before us and take a step back. “Forget it. I don’t want to get into an argument with you.”

“Why do you hate me? What did I do?” His brow creases in genuine confusion, and I wait for a second, hoping he’ll crack a smug smile. But when he doesn’t, laughter shoots out of me.

“What did you do? Let me think.” I tap my finger over my bottom lip, but only for a second. “You ruined my date. You—”

“Your fake date,” he interrupts, the humor long gone from his eyes.

“What... You...” I’m once again fumbling for words before him. I close my eyes because looking at his gorgeous face definitely kills some of my brain cells. “You ruined my chance at performing in one of the biggest events of the year.”

“How?”

My eyes shoot open when his thumb lightly grazes my cheek. Like the previous night, electricity crackles between us, but today I feel the calluses on his skin. His hand moves from my face to my hair as thin flakes of snow fall around us. A shiver runs through me, and I know it’s not because of the cold.

“Listen...” I press my lips together. My voice is obnoxiously soft when I continue. “If you’re here to apologize, I accept your apology. But I don’t want to see you ever again. I’m sure a rich guy like you has better things to do on a Friday evening.”

“I’m not here to apologize.” His hand drops, but somehow the distance between us has shrunk. “And how do you know I’m rich?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“You were at The Queen’s, weren’t you?”

“You were there too, or did you forget?” He gives me that mesmerizing twitch of his lips, which is equally frustrating and hypnotic.

“I’m sure one of your friends didn’t lie to the hotel manager and make the booking in their father’s name on your behalf.” I grit my teeth. Why does he get on my nerves so easily?

“No, nothing so dramatic. One of my friends invited me to his party. Does your hatred toward rich men also extend to their not rich friends?”

“I don’t hate anyone. Except for maybe one person...” I give him a wry smile. “Now, if you’re done, I need to leave. I have a bus to catch.”

I take a step toward the bus stop, but before I can go any farther, the scarf tightens around my neck.

“Let me go.” My growl is fiercer than that of a grizzly bear saving her cubs. I turn around to find him standing with both his hands up in the air and the end of my scarf tucked inside his wristwatch.

How the hell did it end up there?

“Is this the last one, Sophia?” The sharpness of his gaze seems to see past the thick, icy wall of my bravado. I stand tongue-tied, my gaze still locked on the end of my scarf dangling through his watch, when he asks again, “Is this the last bus?”

He looks past my shoulder and I follow his gaze, where the red bus, decorated inside with Christmas lights, is leaving.

“The next one will be here in thirty minutes,” I whisper.

He nods and without tugging the fabric that now holds us together, he takes a small step forward, erasing the distance between us. “I’m asking for thirty minutes of your time. Let me prove to you that I’m not the guy you think I am.”

“Why?” The falling snowflakes get thicker, and I can see my warm breath in the air.

“Because I like you.”

“Are you always this forward?” My teeth are chattering again.

“No.” He doesn’t explain more but lightly presses his palm to the small of my back. I feel the warmth of his touch through the layers of my clothes as he guides me toward the bus stop shelter.

By the time we take our seats, the grassy sidewalk is covered with a thin layer of snow.

“I missed this weather. This town,” he says softly, as if he hadn’t planned to voice his thoughts out loud, and then adds, “I can’t stop wondering why in the hell a pretty girl like you would need a fake date.”

“I think you need better hobbies or a more engaging job.”

The laughter that shoots out of his mouth has my frosty toes curling in my shoes.  
“You are...”

I hold my breath, excited and nervous to know how he'll end this sentence.

“Fascinating.”

My heart soars in delight.

“Tell me,” he prompts again.

“I’m not in the habit of sharing my personal life with strangers.”

Something resembling surprise and amusement flares bright in his whiskey eyes. He places his hand forward. “Hi, Sophia. I am Ash... Asher.”

I can’t hold back my snort. “Hi, Ash... Asher. Does this make you less of a stranger?”

“It makes me more of a friend.”

“What are you doing here, Asher?” I ask before he can put me more under the spell of his enchanting smile.

“Is it so hard to believe I want to be your friend?” He slightly drops his head to the side.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

Heat rushes at the back of my neck, and I drop my gaze. I drag my feet back and forth over the thin sheen of ice. “Are you sure you’re not some rich guy who has an ongoing bet with his friends that he can get the girl spotted sitting alone in the fancy bar with a classic romance book?”

A muscle tics in his jaw, but before I can flinch back, he gathers my cold hands between his palms. “I don’t lie, Sophia. Please never forget that.”

Only when I nod does he continue.

“I’m here right now, not because of any bet but simply because I cannot stop thinking about a fiery girl with deep blue eyes. I can’t help but imagine how the night would have ended if she were with me and not with that coward, loser Jeremy.” His jaw pulses for a second. “I’d have probably received a kiss instead of a slap.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“I’ll accept your apology if you tell me what you were doing there.”

With my hands still in his, I end up telling this stranger why I was desperate enough to have a fake date.

“I’ll accompany you,” Asher states once I tell him how I’ll miss a chance of a lifetime.

“No!”

“Why not? You might have guessed by now that I like you enough to track your place of work. We can get to know each other some more, and if I’m correct about us, by the end of the night, you’ll give me a real kiss.”

I push away the butterflies who are eager to take flight in my stomach, and say with a regal tilt of my chin, “You are one cocky guy.”

“Say yes, Sophia.” Asher squeezes my hand. Behind him, I spot the headlights of the bus skating through the snow. “Worst case, you won’t lose your chance of performing at the New Year’s Gala.”

I tug the end of my scarf, which is still held in the metal of his watch, and get up to take the bus. But before the door closes, taking me away from Asher, I holler, “14 Mulberry Street. Dress to impress, Ash... Asher.”

The giant smile that lights his face has me wondering if tomorrow night will save me or be my biggest fall.

5

SOPHIA

“Will we be seeing your boyfriend today, Soph?” Nicoleta asks as she takes a seat next to me. I don’t know if she and Leonardo have once again matched their colors deliberately or if it’s by chance that her pink blouse matches perfectly to his blazer.

This is a new height of desperation.

Look who’s speaking. My inner voice won’t let me have a day of peace.

But watching Leonardo with Miss Tess, all my hopes deflate. Anxiety balloons inside

me. I should have prepared Asher. At least we should have straightened out our dating story.

“Yes, you told me so much about him. It feels like we already know him.” Miss Tee throws kerosene onto the burning fire of my anxiety. I don’t even remember what all I blurted out last week about my fictional boyfriend.

The door to the grand hall opens, and my pulse skyrockets as Asher walks inside. There’s a thin sheen of snow over his black hair, which is perfectly styled back. The contrast of the red tie against his black suit is delicious.

“Seems Nicoleta and Leonardo aren’t the only couple who decided to match.” Miss Tee’s head jerks to the red scarf around my neck.

Electricity sizzles inside me, burning me from the inside out as Asher saunters toward us. My cheeks heat when he dips his head. I wait in anticipation for the feel of his lips over mine like that night in the bar, but he kisses my cheek instead. Those butterflies who were asleep this morning flutter in my stomach, making me aware of their presence.

The back of Asher’s hand skims over my cheek, and for a second, I start to believe in the lie. He’s madly in love with me. I can’t tear my gaze away from his whiskey eyes, until there’s a clearing of a throat.

“Um, oh, I...” I fumble before finding my voice. “This is Asher.”

The smile on Asher’s face doesn’t slip as he turns to Miss Tee. Something akin to jealousy hits my chest when he kisses her proffered hand. But pride douses every other emotion when my gaze lands on Nicoleta’s fuming face and the way she throws daggers at Leonardo.

I curl my hand around Asher's arm, smiling like a perfectly doting girlfriend. He looks down at me with a raised eyebrow before going back to listening to Miss Tee's eloquent reply to his simple question of how she's doing.

"This is Nicoleta and her boyfriend, Leonardo." Miss Tee does the introductions before I get a chance.

Asher shifts, and my hand on his arm slips, but soon he pulls me closer. My pulse skyrockets when his hand tightens around my waist. The contrast of his hand, his black suit, and the steel of his watch over my olive dress feels like we've planned it all with great precision. I jerk my head up to notice Nicoleta's and Leonardo's gazes pinned on the same spot.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Hi, man. I like your watch. Isn’t this Patek Philippe’s latest launch? This must have cost you a fortune.”

A heavy ball of doubt lodges in my throat, making it difficult to swallow, which is only intensified by Nicoleta’s sharp squeal. “I never thought you’d ever date a rich guy, Sophia. You used to hate everything about rich folks.”

“Really, Sophia?” Miss Tee’s eyebrow arches in question, and even though I know my opinions aren’t wrong, I squirm.

“I don’t think it’s fair that people get undue advantage based on the family they’re born into. It’s not like we have any control of it. Talent should always be a determining factor for success and opportunities.”

Miss Tee seems satisfied, but Nicoleta deadpans, “Yet, you’re with Asher.”

I’m speechless because even though Asher told me he was at The Queen’s honoring an invitation, I don’t know what he does for a living. From the silky fabric of his suit and his polished demeanor, it’s clear he isn’t a driver or a farmer.

When I look at Asher, he smiles and then replies to Nicoleta. “My friend’s father works at the watch company, and they often receive gifts. I knew today was a big day for Soph, so…” He shrugs, and Miss Tee finishes his sentence.

“You borrowed it. That’s so nice of you to do that for Sophia.”

How does he do that? Impress everyone effortlessly with that regal charm.

But Nicoleta isn't done yet. "What do you do for a living, Asher?"

"I work at The Queen's," he replies without hesitation.

"How did you two meet?"

"Coincidentally, at The Queen's. Sophia was there to meet a... friend." His jaw clenches, and I bite back my shiver at the sight of his over-the-top jealous nature.

"Do you—"

Thankfully, Miss Tee interrupts the burning line of questions. "Let the poor boy catch a breath, Nicoleta."

"Would you like a drink?" I ask Asher.

He shakes his head. "I'll be driving us home."

Handsome and responsible. For a second, I wish Asher wasn't a fake boyfriend.

"Do you play... or sing?" Miss Tee queries.

Asher's controlled mask lowers for a beat as he chuckles, and the deep, rich sound vibrates in my limbs. "I do not have a musical bone in my body."

"But you love listening to Sophia play, don't you?" Miss Tee grins.

Nervousness flows inside me when Asher shrugs. What kind of boyfriend doesn't love to hear his professional pianist girlfriend play?

"Sophia wants me to hear her play at the New Year's Gala for the first time. That's

why performing in this event is so important to her.”

Holy moly! He didn’t just say that.

The daggers Nicoleta was shooting my way have turned into bombs, but Miss Tee doesn’t seem to mind at all. “Then we have to make sure that happens, because your girl is very talented.”

“I have no doubt about it.” He grins and places a kiss on my hair.

6

ASHCROFT

“I don’t know what to say,” Sophia whispers as she waves a goodbye to Miss Tee from the passenger seat.

I turn on the ignition of William’s Fiat. “You can say you’d like to go out with me tomorrow.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“What?” The rest of her words are locked inside her throat as she looks at me with wide, surprised eyes.

“Didn’t I tell you that tonight was for you to realize I’m not a jerk? And I also think we’re great together.”

A small grin appears on her lips. “Here I was worrying to death that you’d lost your charming, cocky personality.”

“I’ll never let you worry to death, firecracker. Now tell me you’ll accompany me for dinner tomorrow.”

“I can’t. I have plans.”

“I’m sure you’ll change them for someone who pushed Miss Tee to accept you into her program.”

“That was so slick of you.”

The broad smile on her face gives me confidence, and I grab her hand. “Say yes, Soph. You know you want to.”

Instead of replying, she tilts her head to the front. “Take a left from here.”

“I have never begged for a date in my life.”

She turns in her seat, looking out the window, but not before I catch a grin spreading



on her face. Her soft hand is still in my grasp as I navigate through the modest living area. There are Christmas decorations—stars, fresh wreaths, and lights adorn the yards and houses, reminding me of those days with my parents.

She turns to face me again. “What is that sigh for?”

“This is all... very homey. I just realized how much I miss my parents.”

Her voice has a careful alertness when she asks, “Do they live in another town?”

“I lost them a few years ago. Car crash.”

“Oh, Asher.” Her fingers intertwine with mine. “I’m so sorry. I lost my dad two years back. Heart attack.” The forlorn expression on her face feels more sincere than any sympathetic words I’ve heard related to my parents’ death. “Holidays have never been the same.”

When her eyes meet mine, there’s sadness in them. My grip tightens around the steering wheel for two reasons. One, I realize there are things beyond my power that will challenge the promise I made to myself to always keep her happy. Two, how much I hate this fact, even though I met her only last week.

“My home is the last one,” she instructs and I stop immediately. During dinner, she told me she lives with roommates, and I want some more alone time with her. “Why did you stop?”

“About tomorrow... Where shall I pick you up from?”

A small smile pushes her bee-stung lips upward.

Say yes, firecracker.

My battle buddies would be laughing at me if they could see me right now, on the verge of begging.

“Outside the school.” She’s about to leave when I grab her hand.

“You’re forgetting something.”

“What?” Her eyes widen as I give her hand a tug, and she falls against my chest.

“How did I say this night was supposed to end, Sophia?” As much as I love the fire in her, I’m enjoying her speechless for a change. “If I kiss you tonight, will I feel the gentle touch of your hand against my cheek, or will it sting like it did the other night?”

She gulps loudly, and when I think she might back away, Sophia squints for a fraction of a beat. My lips twitch in anticipation of her one-of-a-kind reply. “Aren’t some things worth a risk?”

That’s my girl.

“You’re worth every risk, firecracker.”

I don’t hesitate in planting my lips over hers as I pour everything into the kiss. I aim to show her how much I crave her touch. How I need her more than my next breath. When her hands tangle in my hair, I let go of a low groan. Fisting her hair, I slam my mouth hard against her.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

I pull her close inch by inch, determined to see past the tall walls of self-preservation. Everyone hides their true self, and I'm eager to see Sophia's, a woman who is making a permanent place for herself in my heart.

When I pull back, she whimpers, inflating my ego a bit more. I caress her chin and then her slender neck, stopping at the soft fabric of her red scarf. "I don't want you to think I'm only here for sex."

Her breath hitches at my words, pink drifting across her cheeks.

"I want more with you." It takes all my courage and strength to lean across her seat and open her door. But she makes no effort to step out, as if she doesn't want to leave me either. "My control is razor thin when it comes to you, Soph. If you keep looking at me with that please, fuck me look on your face, I won't take the blame for my next actions."

She sucks in a breath, her wide eyes focused on me for a second before they close. My lips twitch when I notice her counting to ten on her fingers. Those blue orbs latch on to me once again, her fire back. "You have too much ego, Asher." Despite her words, there's an underlying tremble in her voice, telling me she's equally affected.

Sophia steps out, and I watch her amble toward her home. When she reaches the iron gate of the last house, she gently waves at me under the golden glow of the streetlight. I leave her street, reminding my pounding heart that I'll see her tomorrow.

I wait in my dad's office at The Queen's, a room reserved for meetings that need extra privacy. The faceted Scotch glass sits before me, untouched. Tonight, I'm high on my

firecracker, and no drink can compare to that.

There's a knock on the door before William walks inside. "I hope my Fiat helped in your quest, sir?"

"It was extremely helpful. So much so, I'd like to loan it for a longer time. You can pick any of the cars from my garage in exchange."

After I motion for him to take a seat, he sits on the leather armchair. "I don't go out much, Mr. Miller, and when I do, I prefer walking."

"You can call me Ashcroft, William. In fact, I'd prefer it."

"I'm more comfortable with Mr. Miller, sir."

"Why am I not surprised?" I chuckle and William's reply is a small grin. "She's agreed to go out for dinner tomorrow, but I have no clue where to take her. The places I usually go are not a good fit. For some reason, she hates rich men."

My jaw clenches both in frustration and displeasure. The moment I saw her, I knew she would prove to be a challenge. What I didn't realize was how big of a challenge. All my strengths are turning out to be a weakness with her.

William clears his throat. "I'm sorry if I'm overstepping, sir, but my mother used to say that a lie has no legs. It cannot go far."

"My mother would have said something similar." I let go of a sigh. "But before I tell her my truth, I need to know the reasons behind her belief." I change my line of depressing thoughts because they're simply raising my self-doubt. And it's confidence that has taken me where I am today. "Where would you take a girl for a good time, William?"

Unexpectedly, William lips purse and I spot a chink in his calm demeanor. “I’m of no help to you on this matter, sir. I wouldn’t know where to take a girl for a good time.” His sharp gaze tells me more than he’s saying with words. “It’s been years since I went out... with a guy, and those days are past me.”

I’m surprised by William’s uncharacteristic verbosity, but it’s clear how important it is for him that I know about this part of his life. I pick up another glass from the drink table and pour him some Scotch.

He doesn’t hesitate before knocking it off in a gulp. “This isn’t something I share with people. But you’re my employer, like your parents, and in case you have a problem—”

“The only important thing for me is that you are loyal to the Miller family, and the impression I’ve gotten so far is that you’re an asset. My mother knew it, and so did my father.”

William’s bunched shoulders drop, and he says, “Then about your date tomorrow... I might have some thoughts.”

7

SOPHIA

My heart pounds as I walk out of the school. The entire night yesterday, I just tossed and turned in my bed, unable to get Asher and his kiss out of my mind. That man is a wizard, and I’m slowly turning to putty in his hands. All the talks of confidence and self-esteem I impart on my students leave my mind when it comes to him.

I hear the giggles of my students before I see him. Leaning against his Fiat, in black jeans and a pullover, he looks so regal. He might not be rich, but Asher possesses the

polished charm of a king. Before my brain starts to doubt, I mumble to myself, “He works in the hospitality industry, for God’s sake, Soph.”

Once the sidewalk is empty and all my students are gone, I walk out of the gate.

“I was getting worried that you planned to stay hidden the whole night.” He gives me that bewitching smile and opens the passenger seat.

Jesus. Why can’t I be better at sneaking around? “I don’t want my students to get any wrong ideas.”

“What if those ideas are true?”

I look out the window, hiding my smile. I don’t need to inflate his ego by telling him how much I like his cockiness.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Hey, where are you going?” I turn to face him as he takes the highway out of the city.

“This is going to be such a memorable night for you that you’ll ask me to take you out every evening.”

“Aren’t we ambitious?”

His rich laugh fills the car. “Don’t challenge me, firecracker. The more you play hard to get, the more irresistible you become to me.”

My breath hitches at his playful words. “Asher...”

“Yeah?” He pulls his gaze away from the street for a second.

“I might say big words sometimes, but... this is all new to me.” I gulp back the nervousness. “I don’t know what you think of me, but I’m not playing games.”

Like the other night, he holds my hand in his free one and places it over his thigh. “I think of you as a girl with a sassy mouth and a soft heart. My favorite combination.”

I freeze in the warm car when Asher parks in the vast, open parking lot of the Cherrywood Christmas Market. My heart squeezes in pain, and I’m unable to look around or get out of the car.

“You don’t want to be here.” He brings my cold hands to his lips. Even though it wasn’t a question, he waits for me to respond.

“My parents met here for their first date. It was tradition for us to visit the market every year on the twentieth of December, the anniversary of their first date.” Emotion fills my throat, choking my words. I can’t believe he brought me here, and on the twentieth, too. “Every year, my parents bought an ornament for our tree.”

Asher is quiet for several moments, until he places a finger under my chin. His eyes are soft, without a touch of his usual cockiness. “Do you want to go someplace else?”

I shake my head. This isn’t just a lucky coincidence; fate has brought us here tonight.

Asher doesn’t let go of my hand as we walk around the market. He’s been cocky, yes, but also considerate and thoughtful. We eat hot dogs, potato pancakes, and roasted almonds, while sipping mulled wine. Asher jokes with people around us in the food lines, but I always feel his sharp attention on me.

“How is it so far?” He squeezes my hand in his tight grip.

“Unexpectedly great.” I smirk.

“Did you doubt my abilities to take you on a great date, firecracker?” He brings my hand to his lips and kisses it, sending shivers through my body. “So, are you up for some more adventure?”

“Bring it on, big guy.”

He laughs and pulls me toward the exit.

But a few minutes later, I’m groaning loudly. “I’m really reconsidering why I said yes to this adventure.”

“It’s not far,” Asher says in that perfectly balanced voice, while I struggle to catch



my breath as we hike up the hill.

“What’s in that?” I ask, pointing toward the basket he pulled from the trunk of his car before we started.

He throws me a wink and continues his walk. “Something you’ll thank me for later.”

“Mysterious.”

It doesn’t take me long to see another side of Asher as he spreads a blanket under the tree and lights a fire with the wood he brought along.

“Is that even allowed?” I ask, warming my hands around the orange flames.

“Don’t worry, we’re not breaking any rules. It’s open to the public. This place has the best view of the market.” He settles behind me, and when he pulls me closer to his chest, I go willingly.

“It does.” I let go of a sigh. “At the risk of inflating your ego, I didn’t think tonight would end like this.”

His grip tightens around my waist. “Our real date has just started, firecracker. At the risk of getting another slap from you, I want to kiss you. I’ve wanted to since I saw you outside your school.”

I turn around and meet Asher’s hot gaze locked on me. The shadow of red-hot flames on his face and the reflection of fire in his eyes are powerful, but nothing can compare to the inferno that unleashes inside me when his lips touch mine.

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

He kisses me without restraint, and molten fire spreads throughout my veins. When his tongue sweeps along my sealed lips, requesting access, I give in without thought. A sigh of pleasure slips from my mouth when his grip on my hair tightens. My gasp gets lost in him as he nibbles at my bottom lip.

“You taste as good as I remember.” Asher’s rough voice skims over my skin. “No woman has the affect you continue to have on me, Sophia. One look and I knew my life was going to change. One taste and I feel like I can’t live without you.”

“Those are big words for a first date.” As much as I want to bask in his attention and celebrate that this tenacious pull I feel toward him isn’t one-sided, I don’t know if this is how every date goes for Asher.

“That’s the problem, firecracker. I’m out of my element here. I’ve never felt like this for a woman, and I don’t know what the right pace is. What I want is you in my home, my bed, my library. I want to show you off on my arm, but at the same time I want to keep you away from the lecherous looks of men who ever thought they had a chance with you. I want to fuck you and claim every part of your body, mind, and soul. I want to love you so hard that we bring every classic love story to shame.”

My body comes to life with his every word and the way his grip tightens on my face. An ache forms between my legs, making me aware of how close we are. Sitting on his lap, I can feel his hard erection digging against my thigh.

Vulnerability peeks on his face, and it crashes into my heart when he says, “This is new for me too, Sophia. I just want you to follow my heart and not hold back.”

After spending another hour watching the market, we return back to St. Peppers. Tonight, Asher parks outside my house, but I make no effort to step out. I wring my hands unwittingly, only realizing the action when he puts his hand over mine.

“My roommates are gone for the holidays,” I blurt in a dash. “Would you like to come in?” His thumb grazing over my fingers comes to a sudden halt. The air hums in the enclosed space, and blood roars so loudly in my ears that I can’t hear anything else. Asher’s smoldering gaze locks with mine, and he asks, “Are you sure?”

It isn’t a simple question. He knows it. I know it.

And when I nod, he holds my face in his. “I would love to come inside.” My eyes widen when his lips twitch. “I promise it wasn’t a planned innuendo.”

We walk inside my house, and I’ve barely closed the door when Asher tugs on my hand. “Are you sure about this?”

I nod, because I might be confused about why I feel so much for this man after knowing him for such a short time, but there isn’t a doubt in my mind that I’m immensely attracted to Asher.

When I think he might kiss me once again, Asher takes a step back. He slowly works on the buttons of his winter coat. “You’re overly dressed, Soph.”

His hands don’t stop as he takes off his coat and carefully places it on the couch before going for his green pullover. His eyes don’t leave me as I place my red coat next to his and then unwind the scarf. Asher is wearing a white shirt underneath, and for a second, my gaze wanders to his watch, which looks vaguely familiar, but his soft command sizzles every molecule in my body. “Everything.”

My mouth dries up, once again reminding me that Asher isn’t a normal guy. The

level of fire and power he exudes is rare. I remove my boots and stockings and peel off my dress. I don't know if it was hope or wishful thinking when I put on my sexy black lingerie today, but I'm glad I did as Asher's eyes flare with admiration.

“What do you want, firecracker? Do you want me to make love to you and pamper you with sweet nothings when I'm inside you, or do you want me to fuck you so hard that there's no escaping me and this night?”

Jesus!

I was embarrassed before about how wet I was, but his words have fresh moisture sticking against the insides of my thighs. I've had sex in the past, but I know whatever I choose tonight, it'll be different with Asher. And because I want to see this man unbridled and unleashed, I reply, “I want to be fucked. I don't want you to hold back.”

I sometimes amaze myself. How I managed to keep a strong voice, when inside I'm a shivering mess, is a mystery in itself.

“I was hoping you'd say that.” The grin on his face is unlike any I've seen. If I thought his lip twitch was bewitching, the seductive smirk he's giving now holds a promise of dangerous and delectable things.

Asher looks toward the hallway to the three bedrooms, and I reply, “The last one on the right.”

He swoops me up into his arm and marches toward my room, and with a gentle kick, he opens the door. His stride wavers for a second as he looks around, halting briefly at my piano and the wall where I have a picture of Mom, Dad, and me. But the fire once again crackles between us when he places me on the bed. He then steps back and watches me as if I'm the most beautiful woman on earth.

I love the attention and don't make an effort to hide. Asher sheds off his clothes, and I struggle to breathe at the sight of his broad chest and that sexy V-cut, until he pulls down his boxers. His cock is a thing of beauty. I shiver in hope and nervousness of that long, thick, and hard shaft filling me.

I wanted to be fucked, and I know that thing will do wonders at the job.

“Turn around.”

I follow Asher's command without thought, and he unhooks my bra and slides my panties down to my knees. My butt clenches when his large palms graze my ass cheeks before they skim above my waist, my back, and then he flips me once again onto my back. Throwing my underwear behind him, his hand grazes my thighs.

“You're exquisite, Soph. You don't know how many times I've thought if I wasn't at The Queen's that night, it might be that asshole Jeremy doing this to you.” The rawness in his voice startles me, confirming that I like Asher with confidence and not vulnerable.

“Are you really thinking about me and another man while I'm naked before you?” I turn my head to the side, raising an eyebrow in question.

“I love your fire,” he says before his hand drifts over to my sex. Without effort, his thumb finds my clit, rubbing on it until I'm whimpering in need. His finger slips inside me with ease, working deeper, faster. Soon, he works another finger inside me, and I can't resist closing my eyes. The clenching sounds mix with my soft cries and chants of his name.

“Ash.” I'm on the verge of having the best orgasm of my life, when he pulls away. “No!” My whine echoes in the bedroom, but it's followed by a rip of a condom. Asher's cock nudges my entrance as if for permission, and my eyes open. I watch as

he slides inside me.

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“You’re beautiful.” His words are so soft that I think he’s forgotten about my choice and is giving me sweet nothings.

“I want to be fucked, Asher. Hold the sweetness for tomorrow.”

His chuckle is loud against my ear. “Remember you said that, baby.” And he slams inside me in one hard thrust. Air leaves my lungs, pain and pleasure mixing as I try to get accustomed to his size. “You’re so fucking tight. Let me know you’re okay.” His hands graze my cheeks, and I open my eyes and nod.

He waits for the count of three before pulling back and slamming into me once again. Foreign pleasure bursts through me as he gives me what I asked for. He’s relentless, one hand holding my hip and the other around my shoulder. My bed squeals under the weight of his thrusts, mixing with my moans and his grunts.

“You feel better than I imagined, Soph.” His movements are brutal, and I want this man no other way.

His hand drifts down to my breast, and when he squeezes it, I see stars. I shatter into a million pieces, wanting him to be the man who’d pick me up and make me whole, always. Asher’s pounding, which has slacked for a beat, resumes, and my eyes open. He isn’t fighting for his release, and when his fingers thrum against my sensitive clit, I know he’s asking me for more.

“I can’t. Not again.”

He shakes his head, not accepting my answer. “You will. If I don’t make you come at

least five times tonight, I'm not doing my job right, Soph." His palms rest on either side of my face as he rubs my nose with his, making my heart beat hard against my rib cage. I realize these soft moments in between the unrestrained sex are far more dangerous.

"You're a vision when you come." His lips land on mine before he gives me another earth-shattering orgasm.

8

## ASHCROFT

I wake up to the sound of running water in the shower. The thin baby blue curtains remind me I'm not in my own room. I glance at the clock on the nightstand. Fifteen minutes past six. God, when have I last slept so peacefully since returning to St. Peppers?

I put on my slacks from the neatly folded stack on the chair and meet Sophia in the doorway as she steps out of the common shower in the apartment. Wrapped in a soft pink bathrobe and her hair tucked inside a matching towel, she looks so sweet, unlike the girl from last night, who has asked me to fuck her senseless.

"Good morning," she whispers in a breathless tone as her gaze shifts between my face and my naked chest.

"It is now. Let me brush my teeth before I wish you good morning in the best way." I have no interest in losing her due to bad breath.

She giggles, and I can't keep myself from wishing to hear her laughter first thing every morning. "You'll find a fresh toothbrush under the sink."



After getting ready, I find Sophia in the kitchen, where she's pouring coffee into two cups, and there are two plates with breakfast.

"How can I help?" I place a kiss under her ear and marvel at the slight tremor that runs throughout her body.

"Take this to the table," she says with a touch of breathlessness. I carry the two coffee cups with a warm feeling in my heart. A part of my brain argues to run back home. I have a business to run, a staff to command, but for some reason breakfast with Sophia is going to be the highlight of my entire week.

"When are you expected to be at work?" she asks after taking a sip of her coffee.

I place the cutlery to the back of my plate as guilt digs its claws into my heart. She doesn't know that nothing is expected of me, yet I work ten to twelve hours every day in my family business. I know my workers start around nine, but as I told Sophia, I don't lie.

A lie by omission is still a lie, though.

"Usually, I start work around seven."

Her forehead crinkles as she looks down at her watch. "You'll be late today." Before I can tell her not to worry, she asks, "Is your boss hard on you? I know rich men can be..."

I hold her hands on the table, not liking her upset face and also wanting to know what has made her so wary of wealthy men. "What is it, Soph? Why so much hatred toward the wealthy?"

"It's nothing." She tries to pull back, but I tighten my grip. Finally, after a frustrated

sigh, she adds, “My father worked as a bookkeeper for a very rich businessman. He never took any vacations, the pay was bare minimum, and the stress... It tore my dad apart. He always came home late in the evenings, left too early in the mornings, and worked most of the weekends. I never got to see or bond with him. And when I was old enough to know it was of no fault of his own, he had a heart attack, at work. He died at the same desk he had spent more hours at than his home. His asshole boss didn’t even bother to attend the funeral.”

Her jaw clenches, and despite the redness in her eyes, Sophia doesn’t drop a tear. My heart is full with unbridled pride and vivid restlessness. She does hate the rich.

“Your father’s boss was a jerk and a leech, Soph. I don’t think it had anything to do with how much money he possessed. I’ve met some of the kindest people who are rich, not only in wealth but in heart.” My mother being one of them. She would have changed Sophia’s mind in a flash.

Sophia looks at me in confusion, as if she’s never even considered this. But then she closes her eyes and shakes her head. “You can’t change my mind on this, Asher. Not now. Not in a million years.”

I drop her off at the school and return home with fear eating my insides. Sophia hates wealth and here I am, the richest man in town, lying and trying to impress her. I can’t shake this feeling that something will break in the end. Her. Me. Or maybe, just maybe, her thick walls of disbelief will shatter against my love.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

I'm sifting through the letters when a colorful invitation catches my eye. New Year's Eve Gala.

I rip the envelope from the side and read the letters printed in gold ink on pearly white paper.

The gala committee would like to invite the Miller family as our honorary guests. The event will start with a speech from the town mayor, followed by a night of musical entertainment, when some of the best performers in town will showcase their extraordinary talent.

The best performers. One of them could be Sophia.

"Larry?" I holler, and in two seconds, he's before me.

"Yes, Mr. Miller?" he asks with a slight tremble in his voice.

"Why do you get so nervous whenever I call you?"

Larry's eyes widen, and almost unconsciously he grabs the ends of his tie to wipe off the sweat beads from his forehead. "Every day when I come to work, I think this will be my last day here. Every day when I leave, I'm glad I got through another day. But moments like these, when you call me inside, I wonder if today is the end."

My eyebrows raise at his little speech. This is probably the first time Larry has spoken this much to me. Maybe he's finally realized I like straight answers.

“This is my first job behind the desk, sir. Before this, I was a wood craftsman. But I became a father last month, and I need a stable income for my wife and daughter.” He pauses and looks at me. “I’m trying, Mr. Miller.”

I can’t help but wonder if I’ve been the asshole boss to Larry like Sophia’s father’s boss was to him. I place the stack of letters onto the desk, except the gala invite, and ask him to take a seat.

“I’m not firing you. Not today. Not in the near future.” Larry’s shoulders relax. “I need good, hardworking employees as much as you need a good job. I don’t mind if you need a few more weeks to get a hang of everything, I just want you to be loyal and dedicated when you are here. If you’re stressed, you’re no good to me or to yourself.”

He nods. “Thank you so much, sir.”

“This letter?” I show him the invite.

“The town knows you’re back, sir. They expect, or at least hope, to see you during the holidays. Do you want me to send a reply?”

I shake my head. “I’ll do that.” Larry is about to exit the door to my office, when an idea hits me. “Were you a good craftsman?”

He turns, and this time there’s no nervousness in his voice. “I was the best, sir.”

“Then I have a task for you, and this takes precedence over all other things.”

Later that evening, I get an unexpected call. “Asher?” Sophia’s breathless voice sounds like sweet honey.

“Hi, firecracker. All okay?”

“Yes. I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask away.” I lean back in my chair.

“Would you like to have dinner on Christmas Eve?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“Don’t inflate that big ego. Your head is already enough big.”

“Uh-huh. From what I can remember, you loved my big head last night.”

Her breath hitches. “You’re so bad.”

“And I want to do all bad things to you. Tell me I can see you tonight.”

“Only if you come to my mom’s place for Christmas dinner. Unless you have plans elsewhere,” she quickly adds.

“I told you, I don’t have any family, Soph. I’d be honored to be your mom’s guest.”

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Thank you.” There’s a clear satisfaction in her voice. “I told her about you today, so of course she now wants to meet you. I thought, what better way than over Christmas dinner?”

“I love the way your brain works, firecracker. Now about tonight...”

\*\*\*

Sophia lies in my arms against the fireplace in her living room. As soon as we stepped inside the house, I couldn’t wait, and from the way she tugged on my clothes, she felt the same. I took her against the door, on the couch, on the thick rug, and now I’m loving the feel of her naked skin against mine as we lie peacefully before the soft crackling of burning wood.

“I love this.” I take a deep breath.

She burrows herself more into me, and her words muffle against my skin. “Don’t get too comfortable. My roommates will be back after the holidays.”

“I’m not looking forward to it.”

She chuckles and looks up. “I love your pout.” Her finger traces my lips, and I kiss it.

“Men don’t pout.”

She laughs some more. “Don’t worry, your masculinity isn’t being called into question right now. Even Miss Tee was asking about you today.”

“You met with Miss Tee?” I jerk up, sitting straighter.

She nods. “It seems the time of mingling is over.” Her hands twist the side of the throw blanket spread over us. “They invited all the contestants for an impromptu performance.”

I tighten my hold on her. “I’m sure you were great.”

“How do you know? You haven’t even heard me play.” Even though her words are lighthearted, the expression on her face is serious.

“That’s true. But if I know one thing, babe, you don’t do things half-assed. As much as I admire this quality, it also scares the hell out of me.” I throw my head back and stare at the roof, dreading the day when my reality is exposed to her.

“Scare?” She turns around to face me fully. “I have a hard time believing anything scares you, Asher.”

“It didn’t used to.” I bring my gaze back on her face and clear my throat once to get rid of the foreign, cold heaviness gripping my chest. “But for some reason, I’m scared at the thought that if you ever chose to hate me, I might never get you back.”

“Asher! Why would you say something like this? I love...” Her eyes widen, and my grip on her tightens.

“Finish the sentence, Soph.”

She swallows hard and her blue eyes gleam, matching the burning fire before us. “I... I love... everything about you.”

“And I love you.”

“Ash.” She closes her eyes, leaving me bereft of her tender gaze. “This is too fast.”

“I don’t care. I’ve never felt anything like this before. If you need time, take it. But I’m sure about you—about us, Soph.”

Her breath hitches, and her hands lock around my neck. “You sure?”

“I don’t have a single ounce of doubt.” But I understand her hesitation. This isn’t just fast. Our attraction is like a rolling snowball, growing every second. “Now, tell me about this impromptu performance.”

“I think I played well.” She releases a sigh. “I’m sure they’d have already selected the performers. I really want this part, Asher.”

“You’ll be in it, baby.”

The next day, I’m sitting in my office with the invitation letter in my hand, staring at the contact number of the organizing committee printed in gold ink. I hesitate for a few seconds, my brain screaming at me, Don’t do it.

I’m just asking the results for fuck’s sake. It’s harmless.

“Hello, this is Jurgen Kaufmann. How can I help you?”



*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Mr. Kaufmann, I have a special invitation letter for the New Year’s Gala. I was wondering if you could share with me the name of the performers we’ll get to hear in the event.” The special invitations are usually given to only a handful of people, which should at least tell him I’m a person of power.

“I’m sorry, sir, but it’s a huge list. Plus, it’s a surprise. I can assure you that our selection committee is very thorough, and you’ll have a great time.”

My jaw clenches hearing his straight refusal of my request. “Mr. Kaufmann, I’m Ashcroft Miller. I’d—”

“Mr. Miller, sir. Why didn’t you say that before? I can send the list over to your office.”

“No.” Fuck. “I’m just interested in the names of the selected pianists,” I rush to add.

“Of course, sir. Give me a second.”

The longer I stay on hold, the more my conscience screams at me that this isn’t right. I’m about to tell Mr. Kaufmann to drop it, when he’s back on the line. “There are two solo pianist performances, Mr. Miller. One is Nicoleta Wilson and the other is Sophia Jones.” He pauses and hesitates before asking. “Is this all right, or would you like us to change—”

“No. That’s it.”

A smidge of guilt dampens my happiness upon hearing Sophia’s name on the selected

list. But I tell myself that I didn't twist the results. I just inquired about them. What's the harm?

"Is it not good?" I ask as Sophia plays with the gnocchi prepared by my chef. After he'd packed it in plastic containers, I brought it with me to her home.

Startled, she looks between her plate and me. "No, it's delicious. But you didn't have to bring takeout, Asher. I could have cooked for us, you know."

"I know. But I don't want you to think I'm seeing you every night for free food. Although some things are very delicious." I kiss her hand with a brassy smacking sound.

"You're just... too much." Finally, I get to see the small hint of a smile on her face as she snatches her hand away. "I'm nervous about the results. They'll be announced tomorrow afternoon, and if... I'm in, there'll be a few days of practice before the gala."

"What if I told you that I know you're in."

"Knowing and hoping are different things, Asher."

"I didn't say hope, Soph, I said know." My carefree tone, which only makes an appearance when I'm with her, slips and morphs into a voice of the fierce businessman that I am.

"Wh-what... are you saying?" I don't like her stutter. I love the fiery Sophia, and that's the reason for my slipup. I hadn't planned on sharing the news with her, but now the cat is out of the box.

"You are in. I have a friend who knows someone at the planning team, and they saw

your name on the list.”

She goes quiet, forgetting the dinner before us. “How did he get access to the results?”

The suspicion in her slow voice irks me. I’ve never had to answer to anyone in my life, and I take pride in the fact that I’m an honorable man, but with Sophia, neither of those hold true.

“What is it, Soph? Now you don’t like people who are friends with the rich?”

She’s taken aback by my words. “I... I...” she stutters, unable to complete her sentence.

I know, given her past, she has every right to be careful of wealth, but her inability to look beyond this has me believing that there’s no universe where Sophia and I will be happy together.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I hate the conflicted expression on her face. “I understand you keeping a wary eye, but not every rich man is evil, the same way not every struggling man is worthy. I don’t think there’s anything as an absolute good or bad person. People are never black and white, Soph. We’re all some shade of gray based on situations in life.”

I watch her struggling to believe that fact, which she possibly presumes to be true.

“I’m not upset... but scared.” The foreign word feels heavy in my mouth. “If someday you learn that I did something wrong—perhaps lied to you—I’m nervous you won’t give me a chance to explain.”

“You’re a righteous man, Asher.”

“In every righteous man’s life, there’s a day when he’s the most immoral, and I dread mine, because I feel like I’ll lose the one thing that is slowly becoming most important in my life.”

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip and circles the table. I push my chair back, and it makes a scraping sound before Sophia slides onto my lap. “I don’t like the way I think,” she whispers and buries her face in the crook of my neck. The touch of her lips always has my heart racing. “But it’s hard to stop believing something you’ve trusted all your life.”

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“You can borrow some of my faith until you collect yours, babe.” I wasn’t exaggerating when I said she’s becoming one of the most important people in my life—maybe the most important one, even before my parents. When they died, it was sudden and unexpected. Their loss burned a part of my soul, but all I felt was grief and pain. Now, with Sophia, there’s a perpetual dreadfulness sitting on my lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

Her fingers drift back and forth over my stubble. “It’s important to you?” she asks and I nod.

You don’t know how much, firecracker.

9

SOPHIA

Seeing Asher in my mom’s house, sitting on the couch with one hand draped over the backrest, is surreal. As always, my mother has gone all out with the Christmas decorations. There are string lights and fresh wreaths on every window. A giant tree sits in the corner, adorned with all the ornaments we’ve purchased over the years. Asher almost looks out of place.

Unlike other days, he isn’t dressed in jeans and a pullover, but tonight he’s wearing a charcoal gray suit and a crisp white shirt. I wonder if, like his Patek Philippe wristwatch, which has been on his wrist since the dinner at Miss Tee’s, his suit is also borrowed as a part of some wardrobe test.

A gnawing worried sensation develops in the pit of my stomach every time I see Asher from a distance. The regal look on his face, the grace with which he carries himself. Even now, the way he tips his head and nods a thanks to Mom as she offers him a glass of eggnog. He's controlled and classy, unlike most middle-class men, who are in a constant state of stress and panic, especially around the holidays.

Asher's gaze meets mine, and the smile on his lips tips for a beat, making me nervous, but he regains composure so fast that I might have imagined the change in his expression.

"Do you know Sophia is going to play at the New Year's Gala?" The pride in Mom's voice distracts my wildly pacing heart. She doesn't know Asher told me the news before it was publicly announced, and I've been unable to overlook the ominous cloud surrounding this happy news since that night.

"I can't wait to hear her play." Asher's lips twitch into a mesmerizing smile, and as always, my insides flip at the sight of it.

I can't shake this feeling in my gut that something is approaching that will shatter me into pieces, and I might not be able to piece everything back together.

"All okay? You've been lost all night," Asher says as I walk him to his car. His arm wraps around my waist, and even in his touch, I feel a whisper of hesitancy.

It's as if whatever is lurking on the sides is making us step back in this relationship rather than move forward. I hear Asher let go of a deep breath, and he opens the door of his car. My throat chokes as he leaves without saying anything to calm my insecurities. But instead of sliding into the driver's seat, he grabs a small box wrapped in red-and-green paper.

"I got you something for Christmas." He turns the box in his hand, as if unsure how

to give it to me, simply or through some grand gesture. I, on the other hand, can't help my overflowing emotions and throw my arms around him. After a moment's surprise, Asher wraps his arms around me.

"Thank you so much for not leaving without a goodbye." Before I can say more words that are probably nothing but remnants of my anxiety, I pull back. "Now, let me open it."

He drops a box into my hands, but not before kissing my lips. "You're gonna love it."

"There's my cocky, arrogant man." I snort-giggle. How can this man turn my mood so fast is a mystery to me. "What the heck is this?" I tear through the exorbitant number of clear tape stripes.

"I don't have much experience in wrapping gifts."

"You don't say." I bite back my smile at the thought of Asher fighting with tape to hide whatever he bought for me. But when I finally tear the paper aside, my gasp echoes in the cold night. "Asher! It's beautiful." The wooden piano figurine, painted in black, with real keys and shiny metal strings, has my name written over the lid.

"A... colleague of mine does woodwork as a hobby. I asked him to make me this."

The handmade piano, wrapped in poor packaging, is a dream gift, especially when I'm struggling with the uncertainty of Asher's financial situation.

"This is the best Christmas gift." I can't hold back the rising of my toes and placing a kiss on his lips. "I'll see you tomorrow for dinner?" I loop my arms around his neck, my anxiety slowly slipping away.

"Yeah." He grins. "I'm anxiously looking forward to dinner."

The lights on our neighbor's porch turn on, and I let go of Asher, but not before biting his earlobe and whispering, "I'm worth the wait, aren't I?"

"God! You just made it so hard, woman." At his teased words, my gaze slides to the zipper of his jeans and the noticeable bulge, but Asher tips my chin with one finger. "Don't forget, I'll be anxiously waiting."

After throwing another grin toward me, he slides into his car and drives away.

The next day, my mom's neighbor Patricia visits us with her newborn daughter in her arms. "I got some cookies." She tips her head toward the bag dangling in her hand.

Patricia is almost my age, and two years back, she married her long-time boyfriend. We aren't besties, but we've always been friendly. "Come in, Pat. And how's our princess?"

"During the day, she's an angel. It's at night when she's cranky. Hold her for me, please." She puts the cute baby, wrapped in a pink blanket, into my arms.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“She’s beautiful.” I run my finger carefully over her cheeks, worried she’ll throw a crying fit. But this sweetie just looks back at me with almost the same curiosity as I have for her.

“You look good with one in your arms.”

My head jerks to Patricia, now seated comfortably on the couch and looking at me and her daughter. “I still got a lot of time.” Even though I say the words, I’m hit by a pang of longing, and Asher’s face swims before my eyes.

Soph! It’s too soon.

“How’s life?” I return the baby back to Pat before my brain starts to get more crazy ideas.

“Life’s quiet but good. Larry got a new job.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It is. He’s executive assistant to Ashcroft Miller, the heir to the Miller estate. It’s still new, so he’s nervous, but I’m sure he’s doing great. What’s that?” Pat’s eyes narrow as she stares at something behind me. I look over my shoulder and spot the miniature piano on the side table.

“Crap! I forgot to pack it.” I pick it up and hand it to Pat, who is definitely intrigued by my cute present. “I got it as a Christmas gift.”

“From whom?” She sounds more alarmed than surprised, and her question leaves me confused. She inspects the piano from all sides, as if she just found a stolen piece of her jewelry, and my hands itch to have it back.

“A friend.” I sigh in relief when Pat reluctantly returns my precious belonging.

“I don’t know what kind of coincidence this is... but I swear, Soph, Larry made exactly this for his boss as a Christmas present. Um... okay, not exactly, because that didn’t have your name engraved on top.” When her daughter starts to fuss, Pat tends to her, but after a beat she looks up. “You don’t happen to know Ashcroft Miller by any chance, right?”

My heart pounds as I shake my head.

Asher. Ashcroft Miller. Don’t they sound similar? My brain laughs derisively at me.

No. Two people can have similar names. Asher isn’t the richest man in St. Peppers. No way.

My stomach is in knots all during the ride from my mom’s place to my apartment. Anxiety balloons inside me, ready to invade every cell in my body. My legs tremble as I get off the bus and walk to my house. The lights of the living room are already on. Asher must have used the key hidden under the doormat. I walk through the wrought-iron gate, mentally repeating questions to ask Asher about his job. But I lose track of my thoughts when the door to my house is ripped open before I can ring the bell.

Asher greets me in a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and black pants. There’s a kitchen towel over his one shoulder and a streak of... flour, or maybe sugar, on his cheek.

“I saw you through the window.” The excitement on his face makes me forget everything else.

“What’s happening?” I peek inside.

“I made dinner for us.” My heart clenches at his proud tone.

Oh, Ash. I feel like a huge burden has been lifted from my chest. This is my Asher.

He holds my hand and leads me to the dining table. There’s a simple white candle lit and fresh flowers in the vase. He drags over a chair for me and pours some champagne.

“I feel like a queen.”

“Hold on to that thought until you see the food, babe.” Asher places a swift kiss on my lips and dashes to the kitchen.

I’m still smiling when he returns with two plates and slides one toward me. I look between him and the food for another second before I fall into a fit of laughter.

“You don’t have to eat it.” The uncharacteristic red coating the tips of Asher’s ears makes me laugh harder. “It’s supposed to be a pancake,” he explains.

“I can see that. But why is it so black?”

Instead of replying, Asher gets down on one knee. “I can’t impress you with my cooking. That’s a given now.”

“What inspired you to put your cooking abilities to the test tonight?”

“Since I’ve met you, you’ve been the inspiration for all my thoughts, Soph. You and no one else.” My heart skips a beat when he grazes my cheek. “Let’s get some takeout.” Asher’s voice is hoarse as he makes the butterflies crazy inside my stomach.

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“I want to eat what you made.” I can’t pull my gaze away from him and notice the way his eyes widen in surprise.

“It’s not worth eating, firecracker.”

“My boyfriend doesn’t do anything half-assed, so I know he’s spent a hell of a lot of time arranging all this for me.” I wave my hand around us. “I’m not going to let his hard work go to waste.”

“Your sweetness will someday kill me.” Asher groans as I cut a piece of the charred pancake and put it into my mouth. He cringes, making me smile some more.

“It’s... good, actually. I mean, the batter is good.”

“Yeah, the measuring part was easy. It was the cooking part that turned out to be the bane of my existence.” He shakes his head before glaring at the burnt food, as if it was the pancake’s fault that it didn’t jump off the flame at the right moment.

“Come with me.” My steps come to a halt at the kitchen doorway. “Okay, I’ll show you tomorrow how you clean the kitchen as you go, because believe me, entering a messy kitchen is almost as bad as sleeping hungry.”

I quickly make space on the counter while intermittently looking at Asher, who’s preparing the batter with a precision of a heart surgeon performing a procedure. When I turn the flame on, he starts to back away, but I pull him closer. “You are not running away, mister. I’ll show you one, and then you’ll make the rest.”

And when Asher places the last pancake onto the table, any thoughts I had of him being anything other than my wonderful boyfriend are gone.

10

SOPHIA

“Best of luck, sweetheart. You’re going to be amazing.” My grip on the phone tightens, and I wish Asher was here in person and I wasn’t just hearing his voice on the phone. As if he can hear my unspoken words, he says, “I’ll be there, Soph. I’ll be watching you play from the front row.”

“Thank you so much.” My voice shakes as I end the call. I get dressed into my blue silk dress, which I purchased two years ago for such special occasions. My hands shake as I french braid my hair, as I do for all performances. I hate the locks sticking at my face while playing. I’ve never felt this nervous before. I remind myself that it’s better to perform bad than not perform at all, because the way my pulse escalates, I feel like I’ll pass out at any moment.

After grabbing my handbag, I leave the house.

“Are you nervous?” A sax performer asks, wiping his forehead with a pocket square.

“A little.” I hate the tremble in my voice.

You’re not a wuss for fuck’s sake, Soph. You’re a fighter. You’re a—

“It’s my first time.” The young man interrupts my mental pep talk and then cringes immediately. “I mean... my first performance.”

“You’ll do great.” My nervousness calms, knowing I’m not alone, until Nicoleta

walks in wearing a pale blue dress and her hair in a french braid exactly like mine.

“Are you performing together?” The sax player, whose name I never caught, asks as Nicoleta throws me a wry smile.

Before I can say anything, she replies to him. “No. I’m performing before her.” She turns to me. “I don’t know how many people will be looking forward to another pianist after me, Soph.”

Watching the expression of pity on her face, unhealthy anger rushes throughout my body. Undesirable thoughts of Nicoleta meeting an accident right before her performance hit me like a blizzard, leaving me with a feeling of guilt in their wake.

“Don’t worry, tonight I’m playing for Asher.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, energy shoots like sparks, flowing throughout my veins. The fear and anger are replaced by anticipation.

Asher will be in the first seat, just for me. That’s what matters and nothing else. Not the crowd, and definitely not Nicoleta.

The dry smile slips from Nicoleta’s face for a second. “I must say, I’m envious of you. Asher seems to be a complete package. Where did you find him anyway? It would be hard to ignore a man like him in St. Peppers.”

“I think what’s meant for us finds us. You don’t always have to go hunting, or imitating.”

Her laughter is still echoing in the green room when one of the organizers rushes inside. He holds a small box and, with shaking hands, attempts to pry off the tight golden latch unsuccessfully. “I can’t believe he’s here.”

“Mr. Kaufmann, do you need help?” I reach him before he passes out.

He nods, handing me the soft blue velvet. “Mr. Miller is here. He RSVPed, but we weren’t sure.”

My gasp is loud at the sight of a shiny sapphire lapel pin.



*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Mr. Kaufmann takes the box from my hands. “After the first successful event, the gala committee commissioned this pin for the Miller family, who had donated huge funds to build this site.” He looks around the beautiful hall. “But the richest family in town is as generous as they are dignified. They never took the pin home. Since then, it became customary for the honorary guest of the Miller family to enjoy the performances of the Gala night wearing this pin and then return it back at the end of the evening. The box is then closed for the next year. But after the death of his parents, Mr. Ashcroft Miller never came home for the holidays. However, tonight, he’s here.”

My mouth dries at hearing the name. Even when I tell myself there’s nothing to worry about, I can’t help the fluttering in my chest. “He... Mr. Miller... is here?”

“Yes, front row,” Mr. Kaufmann responds and leaves me more nervous than I was before.

“Wow! I heard he’s taking over the family business. This is possibly the first society event he’s participating in.” Unlike me, the sax player seems to have lost some of his nervousness. “I hope I get a chance to talk to him. I’ve heard he’s hiring new staff.”

I flop down onto my seat, but not before eyeing Nicoleta adjust the split of her dress to show more of her leg.

My nerves remain tight as the performances start. One after the other, performers leave the room and return with a relieved, excited face.

I’m after Nicoleta, and my heart hammers when she returns back. I prepare myself for

some narcissistic comment from her. Something along the lines of no one is holding their breath for me after her great performance. But what she really says tips my world. “You’re in for a real surprise, Soph. Break a leg.”

Before I can even make sense of her words, I’m escorted to the stage. I’ve always found the blinding stage lights comforting, but tonight I’d have loved to get a glimpse of the crowd. The familiar, yet odd warmth stays with me as I place my hands onto the keys of the grand piano.

I take a deep breath and let the music flow from my fingers. But my mind is in a totally different realm. Images of the night I met Asher at The Queen’s float before me. Until now, whenever I’ve thought about that night, I’ve imagined his cocky smile and beautiful face, but tonight my brain forces me to see beyond that. The confidence with which he walked toward me. His black suit, which twinkled under the lights. His gold cufflinks. The authority in his voice when he threatened Jeremy. With each reflection, my heart squeezes tighter.

I cannot control when my fingers drift toward the melancholy notes. The more minor chords I play, the more I can’t escape my own brain.

Asher acting flawless at Miss Tee’s party. Asher never in haste to run to a job in the morning. Asher always outside my school in the evenings. And then his gift, the handmade wooden piano, which I found out isn’t one of a kind.

Tears run down my cheeks, falling onto my fingers over the keys, and for the first time, I curse my french braid.

The show ends and the light shifts away from me, and all my imaginations come to life when I spot the sapphire lapel pin on none other than my boyfriend’s expensive suit as he’s seated in the front row between the organizers and judges.

His hard face and clenched jaw make me want to curl into the fetal position on my bed and hope that tonight is nothing but a dream. My tears haven't stopped, and in my mind, I'm asking him a slew of questions, all of which start with a why.

I'm rushed off the stage to the green room to grab my bag, hoping to leave this place as soon as I can, but it isn't my day. The room is filled with performers, and Nicoleta's voice is as loud as a boom.

"You didn't say you were dating Ashcroft Miller." A dead silence falls around us as soon as the words are out of her mouth. "I find it hard to believe he had nothing to do with your selection."

Dread washes over me like unexpected rain as I remember the night Asher told me he knew I was in. The night of our argument. His agitation at my aversion to the rich. Did he have something to do with—

No, not at all. He wouldn't do this. Plus, I'm a good pianist.

"Why would you say such a thing?" I clutch my silver silk bag close to my chest. "There was a time we used to be friends. Have you forgotten everything?"

The cunning smile slips from Nicoleta's face, and I take that chance to flee. But with her hurried steps, she catches up with me before I can leave the building. She grabs my hand and pulls me back.

"It's hard to remember anything good when you're constantly reminded that you are and always will be a second, an alternate. Always good, but never good enough to reach the top."

"What are you saying?"

“Since music school, your shadow hasn’t left my side, Sophia. Is it my fault that my heart found peace in classical music, knowing there’s already a very good classical pianist in town? Wherever I go or whenever I express an opinion, I’m always told, ‘Sounds good, but we’ll check with Sophia.’” My heart aches as her red eyes turn stormy. “I decided if they want Sophia, then I’ll become Sophia. But if only I had your luck. You got every great thing in this town, including Ashcroft Miller.”

“I never asked for anything, Nicoleta, especially Ash...croft.”

“Yet, you have him. And with the way you cried on stage, I’m sure you’ll win the best performance trophy tonight.”

She leaves my hand and takes a step back. Her usual haughtiness slips away, and her sad face reminds me of the girl she used to be.

“I’m sorry for everything,” I whisper and turn around to forget the night that was supposed to be the most memorable evening of my life.

11

## ASHCROFT

“Mr. Miller, I cannot tell you how much we all appreciate you taking the time to attend the Gala,” Mr. Kaufmann repeats for probably the hundredth time as I return him the sapphire pin after my speech. I remember him from when I used to come to the gala with my parents.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“It’s my pleasure.” I hate to rush the old gentleman, but there are more pressing things on the line. There’s been a pressure in my chest since Sophia’s performance. She looked like an angel sitting at the piano with nonstop tears rolling down her cheeks. It took all my willpower not to march up to the stage and hold her in my arms, protecting her from everything.

But she’s hurting because of me.

“I’d like to meet the participants and congratulate them on their great performance personally,” I tell him.

“Really? They’ll love that.” He’s already turning toward what I assume is the green room. “This way, Mr. Miller.”

My heart thuds in anticipation, forming and erasing explanations to tell Sophia that my intention was never to hurt her, but nothing seems apt.

In the green room, I exchange smiles with all the performers, while my brain scans every corner to find my blue-eyed girl. She isn’t here. Fuck! Did she leave alone for home? I know she arrived in a taxi that was sent by the organizing committee for the performers, as there’s no bus running on New Year’s Eve. Is she walking back home in the cold and snow?

I make an excuse of taking an international call and leave the venue, but just before getting inside my car, I catch sight of blue silk billowing in air. Hope balloons inside me before flattening as Nicoleta walks up to me.

“Mr. Miller, we haven’t been properly introduced.” She offers me her hand, and when I look at it with plain disdain, she runs it over some invisible crease on her dress.

“I just saw you in the green room, Nicoleta.”

But she speaks right through me. She would have been fired on the spot for such audacity if she were my staff. “For the love of God, I can’t fathom why you pretended at Miss Tee’s party. If anything, it would have given Sophia a free pass to the first spot in tonight’s performance. You lied to her too, didn’t you?”

I ignore her question and instead reply to the burning feeling in my chest. “She doesn’t need my help in getting selected for anything.”

“Does she know that? Or does she think she was chosen because the great Ashcroft Miller played his hand?”

My entire life has been a practice in patience and hiding my true feelings, especially my fears in front of others, but after my parents’ death, this is the moment I’ve felt most scared. I give one last look to Nicoleta before getting inside my car and driving away. Even when I can’t see her in the rearview mirror, her words haunt me as I drive in the direction of Sophia’s house.

Snow flurries make it difficult to see as I search for blue silk amidst the blinding white, but it doesn’t take long. I bring my car—my beloved McLaren, and not William’s borrowed Fiat—to a walking speed.

“Soph, get in the car.”

When she looks at me, there’s no surprise in her eyes, only hurt. “Go away, Asher. Or shall I say Ashcroft?”

All the words I was practicing during the drive fall short, and I'm left tongue-tied as she carries on with her march. I catch up to her. "Please, Soph. It's too cold to walk without a coat. Let's talk in the car."

"I want to hear nothing."

"Okay, then let me drive you home. I promise I won't say a word." At least not on the ride. When she almost slips on the slippery sidewalk, all my control drowns. "If you don't get into the car, I'll physically deposit your sweet ass inside."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I'm one microsecond away from stepping out." If looks could kill, her angry eyes would burn me alive, but I'll bear her wrath to save her from an injury on ice any day. "Now, Sophia."

My molars grind to the point of hurting when she gets inside and releases a shudder. I blast the heat to full and pick up speed. I need to get her home soon, because she's definitely not going to accept my coat from the backseat.

"Where are you going?" She turns in the passenger seat as I remove my seat belt after parking outside her apartment.

"Inside. We're going to talk." I wait for her under the overhang of her porch.

"Asher, there's nothing more I need to hear." The anguish and loss of feistiness in Sophia's voice churns my insides. She should fight back like always and call me out on my arrogance.

"Don't make decisions and opinions based on one night, Soph. You've known me for weeks now."

She closes her eyes, and I hate the lone tear that finds an escape.

It feels like someone has pushed a thousand daggers inside me when she flinches as I graze her cheek with the back of my hand. “Do you remember when I told you I’d never lie to you?”

“There was no truth between us, Ash, and it would be stupid of me to think we can build something on a foundation of lies.”

“I was just trying to show you that not every rich man is the devil, Soph.”



*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Then you played a losing game, because all you showed me is that every prejudice, every wariness I have for the rich, is well placed. You deceived me, lied to me, and played with my feelings.”

I don't know if what I'm feeling right now is the onset of a heart attack or a case of extreme heartburn, but I know this feeling will stay with me long after Sophia has slammed the door in my face.

12

SOPHIA

Five days have passed since the gala night and also since the time I've stepped out of my house. As I open the door, I don't miss the shiny black McLaren parked across the street.

The first two days, Asher knocked and rang my bell every thirty minutes, but when I confronted him with a burning fever and a sore throat, begging him to stop, he relented. But I soon realized he hadn't agreed to leave, instead, just not to bother me. Now, he shows up every morning with warm breakfast, soup for lunch, and a home-cooked dinner. Even though I haven't spoken to him, I know it'd be stupid of me to not accept the warm and healthy food.

My hands shake as I lock the door. I can't stop wondering if everyone now thinks I got to perform because of Asher. The Best Performer trophy, which has become the bane of my existence, sits on my dining table. I hate him for turning my best achievement into my worst nightmare.

“Soph, let me take you.” Asher catches up to me as I march toward my car, which has been sitting in the garage unused for a few weeks, as I like to take the bus during Christmas season. The hassle of finding a parking spot while I visit main street for shopping isn’t worth the few minutes I save with my own ride.

I get inside the car, ignoring Asher like he’s nothing but an irritating fly buzzing around me, and it effing feels good.

Crap! I should have wiped the glass. Even though the garage was closed, I see dust on the windshield and side mirrors.

I hate getting out with Asher still around. It’s an ordeal to ignore that man. For five days, my brain has thought of nothing but him, asking numerous questions and answering them as my mood saw fit, ranging from Asher being a self-centered asshole to him loving me so much that he lied to me. Of course my traitorous heart wants to believe the later.

I unbuckle my seat belt, but before I can step out, Asher picks up a microfiber cloth from the rag basket and starts wiping the windshield. I hate the hitch in my breath at the way his powder blue shirt stretches under his navy blue striped suit. He’s sporting a blue tie with white polka dots today, which I’d missed until now.

Am I stupid for believing this man, who exudes such power and command at everything he does, was a common man?

No! Don’t you dare go down that rabbit hole, Sophia.

Asher lied to me. There’s no excuse for that. Even after knowing how I feel about the rich, he lied.

With renewed determination, I tug my head high, and once he goes to put the rag

back into the basket, I crank the car. The grinding sound of the engine dies as soon as it starts, and my determination sinks with it. I try again with similar results.

God! Please don't let the battery act up again. I promise I'll take it to the workshop in the evening.

Beads of sweat collect on my forehead and above my lips as I try to start the car multiple times. Asher's tall and broad frame as he stands by the side, arms crossed above his chest, doesn't help.

My effort to hold my self-composure lasts for a few more seconds before I hit my head against the steering wheel. I don't look up, even when the driver's-side door is ripped open.

"Go away, Ash. I don't want to see you, especially now."

He doesn't say anything for several seconds, but I still keep my face hidden. While I'm waiting for him to leave, at the same time calculating how fast I need to run to the bus stop to catch the next bus and make sure I'm still on time, the back door opens. I turn around to see Asher grabbing my bag, which I'd thrown into the backseat earlier.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"I'm going to drop you off at school."

"Listen, Mr. Miller, you might think the sun, the wind, and all the people in this town bow down at your commands, but news flash, I'm not your servant or your staff."

With the way his molars grind, I think a few will fall out. "No, you are not. Because if you were, we would already be halfway to your school. I know you're upset with

me—”

Upset, my foot. I’m downright livid, but he doesn’t let me express my feelings out loud.

“—and I deserve it. But this...” He sweeps his hands around. “This is stupidity. You know you’re late for school. Get in my car and let me drop you. You can sulk in the passenger seat.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Then don’t.”

I look down at my wristwatch before storming out, not even bothering to close the garage. He can do that.

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

I'm waiting for him, and it's not long before Asher returns with my bag in hand and slides into his seat. I curse my hormones for the shiver that runs through my body as he turns on the ignition.

"I like you fuming over crying, Soph. When you're angry, I know you feel for me, even if it's anger," Asher says after we are a few minutes into the drive. His somber voice is devoid of the usual sass.

I don't reply because I don't want to give him the pleasure of thinking he has won in some way. But I'd lying if I say hating him is easier than thinking I've lost him.

Once at school, I'm about to get out when I remember something. "Don't even think about coming to my class with lunch."

I take some solace in the way his eyes widen as I render him speechless and skid away, not knowing there's one more surprise waiting for me.

For some reason, the ache that has found a permanent place in my chest for the past five days subsides as I walk inside the school building. On the way to the staff room, I'm surprised to find Miss Tee inspecting the display case. "Miss Tee, what are you doing here?"

She leads me to the outdoor courtyard. "I'm an alumnus of the school, so the principal allows me to visit in search of talent when I'm organizing new events. But today, I'm here to congratulate you. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there to see your performance. I had to take my daughter to the ER due to food poisoning. Struggles of a single mom." She smiles softly. "But right now, I only want to talk about you."

Until today, I was so focused on impressing Miss Tee that I failed to see her as a normal person. A burning feeling develops in my chest, realizing she's possibly here because of Asher.

"I'm so happy that the judges chose you as the best performer. I saw the recording. You moved the stage, Sophia. I haven't seen such a strong performance at the gala in years." She clutches her hands close to her chest without a mention of Asher, giving me courage to ask the question that has been haunting me for the past few days.

"Miss Tee, does the jury include... the guest of honor?"

Her furrowed eyebrows rise up before she shakes her head. "No. Mr. Miller refused to cast his vote for the best performance." After a moment's pause, she says, "I was confused and surprised to see him with that lapel, until it dawned on me why you decided to keep his true identity a secret. You wanted the selection committee to not be influenced by your boyfriend's stature. And I respect you more for that."

"So Ash had nothing to do with my selection?" I bite my lip when Miss Tee's eyes narrow.

"No, and Sophia, please don't ask that question again. You're not only disrespecting Mr. Miller but also the committee."

"I'm sorry." My chest unfurls for the first time since the event. I did it on my own.

When it's lunchtime, I decide to grab a salad from the faculty cafeteria. The thought of the tasteless salad in comparison to the warm, delicious soup and fresh bread that Ash delivered to my doorstep every day churns my stomach. I'm already berating myself for having such thoughts when the gatekeeper calls my name.

"Miss Sophia, there's someone for you at the main gate."

He didn't! No way is he here after I explicitly told him not to come.

I'm fuming by the time I reach the main gate, and that anger dissipates a little at the sight of a young man in black pants and a white shirt. He has a small paper bag with him.

"Miss Sophia?"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"This is for you," he replies instead and hands me the bag before sauntering away.

When I bring it to the staff room and open it, it's carrot soup with sourdough garlic bread. As I take a sip of the deliciousness, my mind automatically goes to Ash. What is trying to do here, and why?

Ashcroft Miller isn't hurting for women. In fact, girls would kill to spend a day or night with him. And after spending time with him these past few weeks, I know it won't just be because of his wealth.

He's a man girls dream of. He's caring—I look down at the soup, which is proof of that fact—but at the same time, he exudes a power that sometimes feels like that he might be able to command even nature. How had I felt so at ease with him? Every time I saw him, it was like coming home.

The day drags, with my mind restless and going back to Ash after every few minutes. When it's time to go home, I feel a hum of electricity in my chest. Nervousness courses through me as I anticipate seeing him. At the same time, I hate myself for the streak of disappointment that runs down my spine at the thought that I might have pushed him too far.

“Miss Sophia.” The gatekeeper approaches me before I can step out. “Someone brought your car. It’s parked on the street.” He drops my car keys into my hand.

When I get inside my car and turn the key, it starts. Of course Ash took it to the garage and fixed the battery. But that’s not the only thing. The black seats, which were in need of serious repair, have been exchanged with soft beige leather. I turn on the new music system, and my heart pounds when the beginning notes of Franz Liszt’s “Liebestraum” blasts through the speakers.

Does he know how romantic this piece is?

Are you that naive to think that Ashcroft Miller has nothing better to do than prepare a romantic playlist for you?

At dinnertime, seven sharp, I hear footsteps on my porch. But like other days, I don’t wait for him to leave. Ash is just placing the paper bag onto my porch table when I pull the door open.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

There's a moment of surprise in his eyes, but it's gone as fast as it came. "I hope you like Thai." He half turns his head toward the bag.

"What are you doing, Ash?"

"Trying to feed you. Trying to show you that I'm not the jerk you believe me to be."

"I don't believe any such thing, but I know you lied about something that matters to me."

"Why are you upset, Soph? Is it the fact that I have money or the fact that I lied to you? Because if it's the latter, tell me, truly, would you have even considered going out with me if I had told you who I really was that night at The Queen's?" He doesn't wait for my answer. "I saw a girl who was on a date with someone else. Never had my heart raced the way it did then. And behold my luck, she hates the one thing that draws people toward me."

"You're more than your wealth," I whisper at his frustrated words.

"If you truly believe that, then let me show it to you. Spend tomorrow with me."

"I have school."

"Then take a day off. If by the end of the evening you believe I'm the devil you think all rich men are, I promise I'll leave you in peace. As much as it'll rip my heart out to be away from you, I'll do so for your happiness, Soph. Just give me one day."

I look away from his anguished face. “Okay.”

“I’ll be here at seven in the morning. Be ready.”

As promised, Ash shows up on my doorstep at seven o’clock on the dot. Instead of his McLaren, today there’s a limousine parked outside my house. “What is this?” I ask as he gets out and greets me.

The smile that lights his face at my gasp could warm the icy winter air. “You’re getting the full Ashcroft Miller experience today, sweetheart. No secrets. No holding back.” He holds my hand and tugs me toward the street.

A driver opens the door, and I recognize him immediately. “You were at my school yesterday. With lunch.”

“Nice to meet you again, Miss Sophia. I’m William.” He tips his head before sweeping his hand for me to get inside.

“He’s your driver?” My voice rises in pitch as Ash slides next to me. Everything around me is causing sensory overload. The smell of leather, mixed with Ash’s pine-tree smelling cologne. The shiny minibar, with crystal glasses and a matching decanter filled with amber-colored whiskey.

“He is today,” Ash replies and presses a button, which slides the dark roof back, and in its place appears a clear panorama glass. I’m so mesmerized by the sight of falling raindrops that I jolt in my seat when the car suddenly moves.

“Where are we going?”

Ash grins and leans back in his seat. “To where it all started.”

It's a herculean task to pull my gaze away from him as he crosses his leg. He stretches one arm and effortlessly drapes it over my seat while the other elbow rests on the window. He runs his fingers under his lip, and I swear, all I can think is that this man is a gift to women.

"Don't miss anything today, firecracker. It's a day in the life of your man." Even though his lips twitch, there's an underlying seriousness to his voice. He's unlike the cocky, playful man I've come to know all this time.

Maybe that's because he isn't that man today. Instead, he's the great Ashcroft Miller.

The limo stops outside the town library building, and before I can ask Ash why we're here, the door opens. He places his hand on my back and guides me to the entrance, then further into the library. Instead of going to the bookshelves, he leads us to the door marked RESTRICTED. Through the hallway, there are a few closed doors, which I assume are offices of some kind, before Ash stops at the last one. There's a golden nameplate on the door, which reads The Miller Family, and he unlocks the door before turning the knob.

The unexpected interior takes me by surprise. There's a writing desk at the center, over a turquoise carpet. The walls are painted in sky blue, and the furniture is white. There are a few potted plants, and sheer curtains finish the look.

"I didn't know you had such feminine taste."

Ash chuckles. "This was my mom's office."

I don't know how and what to make of it. "Why are we here?"

But instead of replying to my question, he guides me behind the desk and gently nudges me to take a seat.

“I can’t,” I say. “It’s your mother’s.”

“She isn’t going to be angry, Soph.”

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

When he doesn't budge, I flop down begrudgingly, and Ash opens a thick ledger on the table. It's more like a picture book. The first image is of the library, the same building where we are now but several years older.

"My mother was a bibliophile to the point that me and my father were often on the verge of being jealous of fictional characters."

"Now that's a stretch."

"It's not. Unlike mothers who only want to talk about their sons, my mom loved to talk about Mr. Darcy or Mr. Rochester."

"So, your mom was a fan of romantic classics?" I raise an eyebrow.

"My mother was a book fan. She read everything from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. And given how much time she used to spend here, it's no surprise she met Dad here. She was a librarian at that time." He carefully slips in the fact that his mom hadn't belonged to an affluent family before her marriage to his father. "But this building was very different then." Ash nods toward the picture.

I've heard stories of how the Miller family paid huge amounts of money to renovate the library, but I'm not stupid enough to ignore that The Queen's Hotel is above this floor. Its walls might be lined with books, but reading isn't what makes it so popular. It's the lavish parties that generate huge profit every night.

"I've been to The Queen's, Ash. Don't try to tell me that your family renovated this place out of goodwill. We all knew the hotel was always a part of the renovation plan."

I've heard the rumors that your father wanted a hotel at the town square, and the library renovation was just a ruse to acquire the best spot."

"My father knew our family name was synonymous with luxury in this town, and like you said, The Queen's was always a part of the plan, but for different reasons." Ash jerks his head toward the forgotten book before me. "Turn the pages."

It takes me a moment to switch the context of our conversation. I flip the pages, which are filled with photographs of the renovation work. I stop on one with man in a suit in deep conversation with the workers as they all look at maps on a table.

"That's my dad," Ash says, and the same man appears in several more images, making it clear that his father was personally involved in the work.

Then there's a woman in a yellow dress with a young boy dozing on her lap. There are several paint swatches spread out on the table before her. I can't believe the Millers treated the work as if it were the remodeling of their own living room and not a public building. There are several more images of young Asher and his parents while the library slowly comes to life.

"These are members of the library trust." He points to the group, sitting in a circle. "On the next page is the agreement that was made on that day."

I turn the page, and even after reading everything twice, I can't believe the printed words.

All the profits made from The Queen's will go into the upkeep of the library, and the remaining amount will be donated to different schools in town.

"My father ensured that my mother's favorite spot in the world never falls into its initial state ever again. Yeah, The Queen's was always part of the plan, but not for the

reasons you think.”

“But people—”

“People say a lot of things, Sophia. Some due to ignorance, and others due to jealousy. But the Miller family has no authority on the running of this place.”

Before I can say anything, he offers me his hand. We leave the library building and get inside the car. I’m lost in my thoughts as Ash’s driver drives for another half hour before stopping outside a hot dog stand. There are only two customers before us and once they are served, the owner, an elderly man with a thick, bushy mustache, gives Asher a wide grin.

“Today, you are not alone.” He tilts his head toward me.

“And you are not subtle.” Asher chuckles. “Sophia, meet Don, who likes to think of himself as the hot dog king.” He points toward the stand banner.

Donald’s Hot Dogs. The best in town.

“Hi, Don. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, young lady. Be careful with this boy.” I smile at his referring to Ash as a boy, and Don says, “Two, I assume.”

“Three. William is with us.” Asher nods toward his car. Once our order is ready, he hands me one and then marches toward the parked car to deliver the hot snack to his driver.

“Sometimes it’s hard to believe he’s the richest man in town, isn’t it?” Don asks. Like mine, his gaze is focused on the electrifying man before us.

“So you know who he is?”

Don looks at me as if I’m crazy. “Of course. Ashcroft has been coming here since he was a kid. This is where his mom brought his father for their first date. She was from my neighborhood. A sweet but headstrong girl. Maybe a little like you.” He scratches his chin as if imagining Ash’s mom in me.

“Hey, you didn’t start.” Ash jogs to me and looks at my untouched snack.

“I was waiting for you.”



*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

We sit down on a bench a few feet away from the stand.

“It’s really good.” I break the silence that has stretched between us.

“Don’t say this to Don, but this is the best breakfast in town.” Ash grins before taking another big bite.

“You have many happy memories here?”

He nods. “I had all the luxuries growing up, but my parents made sure to teach me that nothing comes for free. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and then my dad worked hard for the wealth that they amassed. They also showed me what money can do. It can change lives. You might not like this. But”—he wipes the corner of his mouth with a napkin—“I’ve always encouraged my staff to work hard, and they get paid well for it. Hard work has the potential to change not only one life but also of the future generations. Money isn’t evil, Sophia. It’s man’s relationship with money that is good or bad. Wanting something that isn’t yours is evil.”

I turn in my seat to look at Asher, and he’s smiling at me. “Come, we have one more place to visit.”

This time, the car stops outside the Miller house. An elderly woman opens the front door. “Welcome home, Mr. Miller.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hardy. This is Sophia, our special guest for today, and Soph, this is Mrs. Hardy, the life of the Miller house. Though she has decided to leave soon.” The petulant pout on Asher’s face is so cute that I can’t resist my smile.

“Not again, Mr. Miller.” Mrs. Hardy takes my coat and motions for me to enter. “You say it as if I’ve not spend fifty years of my life working in this house. This old lady wants to retire.”

“Then retire here. You don’t have to work. Hire someone for the both of us.”

My eyebrows rise, watching this foreign side of Asher. I take a seat on the couch next to him while Mrs. Hardy fixes the fire.

“I have a feeling you won’t be alone for long.” She looks over her shoulder at us and smiles. “Now, I’ll get you both some cake and coffee.”

Once she leaves the room, I ask, “she’s leaving?”

“Yep. She’s been in this place for too long.” He lets go of a frustrated sigh. “I understand, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Several seconds fly by, and I finally muster the courage to say, “I see what you’re trying to show me, Ash. My encounter with rich men has been limited, and I... might have been too fast in judging you.”

He turns in his seat. “Thank you for saying that. Does this mean... you’ll go out with me?”

My heart hammers at the hint of hesitancy in his voice. “Yes, I’ll go out with you.”

Asher grabs my face, but before his lips can make contact with me, we hear Mrs. Hardy’s squeal. “That’s so nice to hear! This boy has been sulking since the night of the gala. I was worried he might forget how to smile.”

“I wasn’t sulking,” Asher says, holding my hand in a tight grip.

“Of course not. That was your twin brother.” Mrs. Hardy places down a tray with two cups of coffee and gingerbread cookies. “Eat them all. These are the best cookies in the world.”

Once she leaves, Asher offers me the plate. “She’s right, you know. These are Nuremberg’s gingerbread cookies. You will not get a more authentic taste.”

“So this is another perk of the rich?” I surprise myself with the joke.

“Oh, you haven’t nearly seen all the perks, Soph. Next year, I’m gonna have a renowned chef make these for us in our hotel room in Germany while we enjoy some red wine overlooking a Christmas market.”

“Really?”

“It’s a promise, babe. As long as you promise not to be upset with me ever again.”

## EPILOGUE

### SOPHIA

“I can’t believe we’re in Germany for Christmas.” Even though it’s been over a week and we’ve visited a different town every other day, this still feels like a dream. I look down from the hotel’s balcony to the colorful tents, lights, and people sipping mulled wine as they browse through the Christmas market.

“Your dessert is served, Mr. Miller.”

Ash and I turn at the voice of Arnold Zimmermann, the renowned chef who cooked for us tonight.

*Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 2:42 am*

“Thank you so much, Arnold.” Ash leaves my side and pays the man, and from the satisfied look on the chef’s face, I can assume he was awarded a handsome tip.

“Merry Christmas to you both.” Arnold nods and leaves the room.

“Authentic gingerbread cookies, or Lebkuchen, as the Germans call it.” I’m reaching for a cookie when he shakes his head. “No. This one.” He points at one that is larger than the rest and placed in the center of the plate.

“They’ll all taste the same.” I chuckle but still pick the one he wanted me to. I’m about to put it in my mouth, when he interrupts once again.

“Split it open first. Don’t just eat. Enjoy the delicacy with all senses. See its texture. Smell the spices.”

“You are taking this cookie way too seriously, Ash.” I raise an eyebrow, but as soon as I split it open, something shiny slips and skitters to the floor.

“Fuck.” Asher grunts and tries to catch whatever fell down.

“Ash.” I’m held captive in my spot when he turns to me, still on his knees.

A nervous smile covers his face. “Maybe this turned out even better.” He holds the ring up for me, where a clear diamond shines brightly. “There’s so much I want to say, but right now all the words feel lacking. So, I’ll state the simple truth. I’ve never felt the way I feel for you, Soph. You are the one for me. My soul mate. My life partner. My everything. And I’m ready to take the next step with you. To start a new

life with you by my side, always and forever. Are you ready?"

"Ash..."

"Just say yes, Soph. Don't keep me waiting. I might look like a strong guy, but my knees are really weak." His nervous chuckle is so uncharacteristic that I break into my own laugh.

"There's nothing weak about you." I get down on my knees and place my hands over his, which are still holding the ring. "I love you, Ashcroft, and I'd love to spend my life with you.

"It's going to be an amazing life, Soph. I promise."