



Enemies with Benefits

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: An indecent proposal turns bitter enemies into insatiable lovers in internationally bestselling author Zara Cox's sizzling-hot finale to The Mortimers: Wealthy & Wicked series! Model-turned-marketing-executive Wren Bingham is the most sensual woman I've ever seen—and my sworn enemy. I've wanted the green-eyed beauty since the first time she strode into my boardroom, but I've never tasted her...until an outdoor encounter hot enough to warm the frigid London air leaves me craving more.

With her CEO brother in rehab and Wren at the reins of Bingham Industries, I need her cooperation on a deal between our two companies. But she's avoiding me—at least when it comes to work. So I make an indecent proposal! For every six hours she works on the deal, I'll give her a mind-blowing orgasm. She should probably be outraged, but instead she insists on another demonstration.

Sleeping with the enemy is a forbidden pleasure, and it's not long before we're crossing every sensual boundary. And a ten-day business trip to sun-drenched Morocco brings us even closer. Neither of us is looking for love, but that doesn't stop our growing feelings. Until Wren is forced to make a choice that could shatter my newly awakened heart...

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CHAPTER ONE

‘ICANTRUSTyou to behave yourself, can’t I?’

Shit.

I dragged my gaze from the statuesque brunette weaving her way through the one-hundred-plus guests sipping vintage champagne on a chilly autumn evening. The five heating towers positioned around the terrace and immediate lamplit grounds of the Surrey mansion were doing their damndest to warm up the abysmal temperature and failing, but I, for one, didn’t need their help.

My body had heated up the moment I spotted Wren Bingham, wearing a clingy jumpsuit that lovingly followed every curve of her spectacular body. Fringed, shoulder-length jet-black hair brushed the frilly-looking scarf wrapped around her shoulders. Stilettos on her feet and a diamond bracelet circling her wrist completed her outfit. Her guests wore double and triple layers but she was obviously nowhere near cold, either.

I didn’t mind one bit because she looked fuckable in the extreme—

‘Jasper?’

I reeled myself in at Aunt Flo’s sharper tone. An apologetic glance her way showed pursed lips and a disapproving glint in her eye. I was usually more circumspect but being in the same vicinity as Wren Bingham always scuppered my concentration.

I cleared my throat. 'Of course I'll behave. Scouts' honour.' The woman who'd been more of a mother to me than my own living parent snorted her disbelief.

'As if they'd have let you anywhere near a Scouts camp. You'd have scandalised them all within an hour.'

I grinned at her no-nonsense reply because her tone was couched in familiar, reassuring warmth. Warmth I let wash over me to disperse the soul-shrivelling chill that came from thinking about my birth mother, which inevitably led to thoughts about my father. Specifically, their arctic wind of rejection, far more brutal than any winter I'd experienced since their desertion. No, tonight most definitely wasn't the time to dwell on that noxious period of my childhood and how it'd ruined not just me but my siblings, too.

Tonight was about bringing recalcitrant business partners to heel. Mostly...

After another search failed to reveal my elusive prey, I focused once more on Wren, that compulsion since Aunt Flo and I had walked through the impressive double doors of the Bingham mansion in Esher forty-five minutes ago pulling at me.

So far I hadn't spotted Wren's brother, Perry Bingham, my primary reason for being here. Sure, I'd nodded and reassured my favourite aunt that accompanying her to this soiree was my pleasure and the right Mortimer thing to do. Also because, on some weird rota only Aunt Flo was privy to, it was apparently my turn to escort her to another social function. What I'd failed to mention was that I was on the hunt for Perry Bingham, CEO of Bingham Industries, who had stopped answering my calls for nearly two weeks, thereby threatening to throw one serious spanner into my latest project.

With my patience wearing thin, I'd grasped the opportunity to track him down at his family estate. Except it looked as if he was a no-show here, too.

But Wren was here, and I intended to drill his sister about his whereabouts. My choice of words brought an inner smirk I wisely kept off my face as I downed my whisky and turned to my aunt.

‘Can I get you another drink?’ I indicated her half-empty glass of sherry.

Several waitstaff circulated with trays of drinks but I didn’t plan to grab one from them. Not when Wren stood next to the bar, chatting with two of her guests. As I watched, she threw her head back in laughter, her smooth, swanlike neck thrown into perfect relief.

Immediately, I imagined my lips there, beneath her jawline, tasting her silky skin, then lower, tonguing her pulse. Would she cry out in delight or moan with pleasure?

‘We both know that’s an excuse to get away from me. Go on, then. Just don’t do anything we’d both be ashamed of come morning, would you? I could do without a Mortimer tabloid scandal before Christmas,’ Aunt Flo said.

Brushing a kiss on a well-preserved cheek, I muttered, ‘You’ve taught me the importance of not making promises I can’t keep. Don’t make me start now.’

She rolled her eyes but her smile deepened.

I grinned again as I made a beeline for the bar, and I wasn’t one little bit ashamed to admit that I was hard as stone.

I made sure to wipe the smile off my face, my eyes settling in the middle distance to prevent business acquaintances engaging me in conversation. A few feet from Wren, I paused to ponder why this woman, amongst so many others, had fired me up ever since she’d crossed my path five years ago.

Perhaps it was discovering that, far from being a superficial heiress and supermodel flitting around the globe between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, she'd attained a master's degree in business while slaying the runways of the fashion capitals of the world. More besides, she'd graduated top of her class and was, at twenty-eight, now on course to become one of the youngest power executives in the city. Or perhaps it was some twisted attraction born from our family being embroiled in a generations-old feud, which dictated we should hate each other on sight like some pathetic Roman tragedy.

Whatever. All I knew was that Wren had intrigued me with increasing intensity over the past few years.

Intense empire-building in order to establish my role in my family's company as President of New Developments in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and perhaps even the arrogant belief that our chemistry was a passing whim and wasn't worth turning my family upside down for, had so far kept me from pursuing Wren, but each encounter only deepened whatever this phenomenal chemistry was that stopped me from seeing any other woman but her whenever we were in each other's orbit.

Lately, I'd accepted that it simply wasn't going to go away by itself, as I'd assumed. Not until I did something about it.

I realised my motionless state was drawing curious attention from nearby guests, not to mention Aunt Flo's disapproving glare from across the terrace.

Discarding my glass, I stepped beside Wren. 'Good evening, Wren. You look incredible.' I said, my voice pitched low.

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She tried not to stiffen, but didn't quite succeed, nor could she disguise the flare of awareness in her vivid green eyes when she turned to me. She didn't reply immediately, instead she scrambled for the jaded expression that had been her trademark in her modelling days.

I stifled the urge to tell her not to bother. Witnessing a demonstration of her fiery passion and stiletto-sharp business acumen five years ago across a boardroom table for an unforgettable fifteen minutes had etched a different Wren Bingham in my mind from the façade she wore for the public.

'Jasper Mortimer.'

The way she said my name, striving to be curt when different textures sizzled beneath, ramped up my temperature. I wanted her attempting to say my name just like that while she was tied to my bed with silken restraints, naked and wet.

'I don't recall seeing your name on the guest list.'

Pausing just as long as she did before answering, I snagged a glass of champagne from the bar. 'Because it wasn't there. I'm privileged to be my aunt's plus one. What I haven't had the privilege of is being acknowledged by the hostess since my arrival. I'm feeling sorely neglected.'

She tried to look through me, as if that would stop the arc of electricity zapping between us. As if she hadn't performed a quick once-over of my body as I got my drink. I planted myself in her line of vision until she had no choice but to focus on me, her nostrils flaring slightly as her green eyes—alluringly wide and sparkling with

an interest she was trying to hide—connected with mine.

I barely heard her guests murmur their excuses and drift away, leaving us in a tight little cocoon.

‘Perhaps I would’ve already greeted you, if you hadn’t arrived half an hour late.’

I curbed a smile, inordinately pleased she’d noticed my arrival. ‘I’m willing to make amends by doubling my donation to tonight’s cause.’

One elegantly shaped eyebrow arched. ‘Name it.’

I frowned. ‘Name what?’

‘The beneficiary of tonight’s cause. What’s this mixer in aid of?’ she challenged.

Crap. I’d tuned Aunt Flo out when she’d mentioned it in the car, my frustrated attention on the echo of the ringing phone Perry was—yet again—refusing to answer. ‘Something to do with pandas in Indonesia?’ I hazarded.

Sparks gathered in her eyes. ‘Why am I not surprised you don’t know?’

Heat surged through me. ‘That suggests a curious level of personal knowledge. Have you been attempting to get to know me behind my back, Wren?’

She gave the smallest gasp, then tried that bored look again. ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. I can’t help it if others feel the need to gossip about you Mortimers.’

‘Oh, yeah? What else do they say about me? What else has that brilliant brain of yours retained?’

Her nose wrinkled in distaste. ‘Nothing worth repeating.’

Unable to resist, I stepped closer. ‘Are you sure? I’m happy to hear you out, set a few things straight if you get anything wrong.’

She didn’t reply. After an age of trying to decipher which I liked more on her skin—the scent of bergamot or the underlying allure of crushed lilies—I looked up to catch her gaze on my mouth.

Hell yes, that insane chemistry was still very much alive and well—and sizzling, as usual.

‘Stop that,’ she said in a tight undertone.

I raised my glass, took a lazy sip before answering. ‘Stop what?’

‘That extremely unsubtle way you’re looking at me,’ she hissed in a ferocious whisper, then glanced around. Thankfully, the music was loud enough for her words to reach my ears only. ‘The way you look at me every time we meet.’

I laughed under my breath. ‘And how do I look at you, Wren?’

‘You might lure some women with those come-fuck-me eyes but I’m not one of them so stop wasting your time.’

My laughter was a little louder, genuine amusement reminding me how long it’d been since I’d enjoyed the thrill of a chase outside the boardroom. ‘Come-fuck-me eyes? Really?’ I didn’t bother to keep my voice down.

Several people stared but I watched Wren, keenly interested in her next move.

She flashed the patently false smile she'd been doling out all evening but I caught the strain beneath the thousand-watt beam. Taking in the rest of her, I sensed tension in her lithe frame, in the fingers that clutched her glass a little too firmly. For reasons I suspected went beyond our conversation, Wren was wound extremely tight tonight.

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And I was curiously concerned about it. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Of course. Why shouldn’t it be?’

I shrugged. ‘You seem a little...stressed.’

Her chin notched upward. ‘You don’t know me well enough to make that assessment.’

‘Ah, but I’ve attended enough of these shindigs to see when the hostess is fretting about the vegan-to-carnivore ratio of her canapés, and when it’s something more. This is something more.’

Her delicate throat moved in a nervous swallow, but her gaze remained bold and direct, swirling with a deep, passionate undercurrent I craved to drown in. ‘Even if it’s the latter, it’s none of your business. Now, if you’ll excuse me—’

‘Where’s Perry?’

She froze mid-brush-off, her eyes widening fractionally. ‘What?’

No, she wasn’t as carefree as she pretended.

The rumours that Bingham’s was in trouble had been circulating for a few years now. The veracity of those rumours was partly why I’d initially been reticent about joining forces with them. But, hell, call me a sucker... I’d always had a thing for the underdog.

Maybe it was a hangover from my daddy issues. Or a tool I used to my advantage when idiots underestimated me. Either way, my instincts hadn't failed me thus far.

There were certain family and board members who considered me, at thirty-one, too young for the position I was in, notwithstanding the fact that my older brother, Damian, and my cousin Gideon had been wildly successful in their newly minted co-CEO positions of the entire Mortimer Group despite being only a few years older. Or that my cousin Bryce was acing his similar position as President of New Developments in Asia and Australia. Even my sister, Gemma, and my cousin Graciela, who'd both resisted joining the board until recently, were excelling in their chosen areas of expertise.

I was damned if I'd let Perry Bingham's antics prove them right. Especially after going against all my business instincts and signing him onto my deal.

'There's nothing wrong with your hearing, Wren. Where's your brother?' I steeled my voice because, however much I enjoyed this erotic dance with her, Perry was at risk of tanking everything I'd worked for during the last eighteen months.

Several expressions filtered through her eyes—alarm, worry, irritation, mild disappointment. She finally settled on indignation. 'Is that why you came?'

'I told you, I accompanied Aunt Flo—'

'A ruse to hunt down my brother,' she interjected.

'That implies awareness that he's hiding. Is he?'

A look flickered across her face, gone too quickly but revealing enough to intensify the unease knotting my belly. 'Tell me where he is, Wren,' I pressed. 'He's been avoiding my calls for almost two weeks and it's getting really old.'

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to do your own hunting. I’m not Perry’s keeper.’ Her tense reply gave her away. As did the minuscule tremble in the fingers that held her glass. Both intrigued and disturbed me but before I could push for more, she added, ‘You’ve monopolised me quite enough. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Jasper.’

Just for the hell of it, and because something wild and reckless yearned for another demonstration that she wasn’t immune to me, I brushed my fingertips down her arm. ‘This isn’t over.’

She attempted to cover her tiny shiver of awareness with a wide sultry smile that diverted my attention to her luscious lips. ‘How can something be over when it didn’t start in the first place?’

With that, she sailed away, her hips swaying in that unique way that’d held male and female gazes rapt during her modelling days. Since then, Wren had gained even more confidence in her womanhood, and left a swathe of admirers slack-jawed in her wake. I wracked my brain, trying to recall if she had a current boyfriend. The gut-tightening rejection at the idea of her being attached made me grimace into my champagne.

Until my gaze fell on the woman who placed herself directly in Wren’s path before manoeuvring her away from the nearest guest.

Agnes Bingham—Wren’s mother and powerhouse socialite in her own right.

The tall, slim woman was what Wren would look like in thirty years. Except where Agnes’s beauty was classically cool, Wren was vibrant, passionate, even though she seemed hell-bent on suppressing it.

Why?

None of your business.

But I wanted to make it my business. I wanted Wren in my bed and damn all the consequences to hell. And more and more I suspected I wouldn't get over this fever in my blood until I'd had her.

Tension of a different kind raced up my spine when mother and daughter glanced my way. The touch of rebellion in Wren's gaze made me raise my glass in a mocking toast, even while I observed the animosity emanating from Agnes Bingham.

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Bloody hell.

Family feuds, Perry Bingham going AWOL and now Agnes Bingham. Three stumbling blocks in my intent to have Wren. But despite the damning words my father had taken pleasure in decimating me with as a child, I wasn't afraid of a challenge.

All the same, my gut twisted as I made my way back to my aunt, the thought of broaching the subject of my father making my stomach curdle.

'Everything okay?' Aunt Flo asked, after smiling an excuse to the guest she'd been chatting to.

I let her fondness wash over me for a moment before I pulled myself together. Wishing her warm concern came from a different female voice had been fruitless when I was a child. It was even more foolish now. The woman who'd given birth to me wasn't interested in taking up her maternal role. Not for her first or second born, and certainly not for me, her third child. My arrival had spelled the end to her obligation and she couldn't get away fast enough. Years of hoping, of saving my allowance in a childish hope of enticing her financially had been laughed off. I was no longer ten years old, fighting to stop myself from crying as Damian advised me to give up my foolish hoping.

'George Bingham. I need to know the full story,' I said to Aunt Flo, my low voice brisker than she deserved.

'What's brought this on? You've never wanted to know before,' she said after eyeing

me in frowning silence.

I shrugged, moving her away to the more private edge of the terrace. 'I've never cared enough about the finer details. Now I do because whatever happened all those years ago is endangering an important deal and I've just about had it.'

'Dear boy, money isn't—'

My bitter laugh stopped her. 'Do me a favour, please, and don't finish that sentence, Aunt Flo. We both know money is definitely everything to any red-blooded Mortimer.'

She harrumphed. 'Well, I don't agree but, since you seem to have a bee in your bonnet about it, I'll let it go. To answer your question, it was your father's last deal before he and your mother stepped away from the company, and the family. He and George Bingham were supposed to go fifty-fifty but George messed up somehow and could only come up with a fraction of the investment by the deadline date. There was a clause in their agreement that it was fifty-fifty or nothing and that loophole gave your father the right to cut him out regardless of how much money he'd pumped into the deal up to then. He didn't take it well. He wasted money he didn't have trying to sue your father. But Hugh was a brilliant, if somewhat ruthless, businessman.'

There was no somewhat about it. I'd come across some of his deals while my father had actively worked in the family firm. His cut-throat antics were legendary. If you liked blood and gore with your negotiations.

A memory shot through my head. 'Was closing that Bingham deal part of my father's walking-away package?' I asked.

Aunt Flo sighed. 'Yes, it was. Back then, every deal closed by a member of the board came with a ten-per-cent profit bonus. Cutting out Bingham and making it an

exclusive Mortimer deal meant Hugh received a bigger bonus. About two hundred million.'

And he was probably in such a hurry to walk away from his family that he'd been unflinchingly ruthless. 'I see.'

'What's going on, Jasper?' Aunt Flo asked curiously.

The cocktail of bitterness, anger and arousal swirled faster inside me as I looked over her shoulder to find Wren watching me. 'It's just business.'

'No, it's not. You're not cut-throat like your father. But you're just as dogged. I had my reservations when I heard about your deal with Perry, considering his problems,' she murmured. 'But knowing you, you'll move mountains to make it work.'

'Forgive me if I don't welcome the comparison to Hugh,' I rasped.

Her eyes clouded with momentary sadness. 'His blood may run through your veins but you're your own man where it counts, Jasper. Whatever you're getting involved in, just...protect your heart. I don't want to see you hurt again.'

Another harsh laugh bubbled up, but I swallowed it down. And just about managed to stop myself from telling her that, while I'd struck a deal with Perry Bingham in a moment of madness, perhaps even a sting of conscience and despite Perry's rumoured drinking problem, somewhere in the mix was the reasoning that it would put me in a good position to strike a better deal with Wren in the near future. Business-wise and in other ways, too.

'You have that gleam in your eye, Jasper. Am I wasting my breath by telling you to be a dear and spare my nerves?' Aunt Flo asked.

I couldn't promise that. Hell, I knew there would be plenty more fireworks between Wren and me in the future. 'I can promise dinner at The Dorchester as soon as my schedule lets up a little. I know how much you like their new chef. We can check out the competition in the process.'

She smiled. 'Cecil is a culinary genius. And very easy on the eyes. I'll hold you to that promise,' she said, just before another acquaintance snagged her attention.

Briefly alone, I tried to suppress the tangled emotions churning through me.

I don't want to see you hurt again.

As much as I wanted to put my parents out of my mind for ever, to rub them from my existence as much as they'd rubbed me from theirs, the ten-year-old boy's anguish from relentless rejection, which I'd never been quite successful in smothering, wouldn't let me. But it was a good reminder not to count on anyone but myself. Not to let frivolous emotion get in the way of business.

I wanted this deal with Bingham because it was sound and profitable.

I also wanted to fuck Wren Bingham, once she got over the pesky family-feud thing. The two were mutually exclusive enough not to cause me to lose any sleep.

Which was why when Wren hurried away from her mother, her shoulders tight with barely-harnessed emotions, I followed.

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She was heading towards the far end of the grounds, her heels sinking soundlessly into the grass. She didn't hear me until I was six feet from her.

'Wren?'

Her head whipped around. 'Are you following me?' she asked sharply. But then she trembled. A tiny reaction, but, coupled with the slight wobble of her mouth, it hastened my steps, the peculiar punch in my chest unsettling me.

'What's wrong?'

'Other than the fact that you're stalking me now?'

'Hardly. You just seem—'

'There's nothing wrong. Just leave me alone, please?'

I looked beyond her to the high hedges of what looked like an elaborate garden. 'If everything's fine, why are you running away from your own party?'

'I'm not running away. And it's not my party—' She caught herself and snatched in a deep breath. 'Why the hell am I explaining myself to you?'

'Because sometimes it helps to vent.' Not that it'd done me much good. Ever. All my good intentions had ended in disaster, the repercussions of which I still lived with. But this wasn't the time or place to examine old scars. 'Or so I've heard, anyway.'

‘Do you go around dishing out inexperienced advice?’

I shook my head, unwilling to drag my far from delightful childhood into this moment. ‘We’re not talking about me.’

‘You’re right, we’re not. In fact, I’m going to pretend you’re not here at all. Feel free to make that a reality,’ she suggested, right before she turned on her heel and marched away from me.

And since I was far too intrigued to heed her brush-off... I followed.

If she gave even a hint of needing comfort, I’d offer her a shoulder, and other parts of my body, to cry on.

Bloody hell. I cringed at my own crassness. Then shrugged it off. I am who I am. And that person wanted Wren Bingham any way he could get her. Besides that, though, I was here on Mortimer business. Technically.

She ignored me until she reached a bricked pathway. Then she turned and stared at me for several seconds without speaking. For a moment, a deep yearning flitted over her face, then her expression blanked. ‘You’re really not going to leave me alone, are you?’ she murmured.

‘Not until you tell me what’s wrong.’ Before she could reply, I jerked my chin at the hedge. ‘What’s behind there?’

Her eyes narrowed, her fingers twitching against her thighs. ‘Nothing interesting. Just the garden. A pool. Gazebo. The usual.’

She was lying. Or at least holding something back. ‘What else?’

‘Why do you want to know?’ she demanded, then flinched as someone laughed loudly nearby.

‘You look like you need a breather. What’s out there?’

‘A maze,’ she confessed with reluctance. ‘I go there sometimes...to think.’

Before my brain could growl its warning that this was a bad idea, I stepped closer. ‘Show me.’

She tensed. ‘Excuse me?’

‘I’d like to see this maze. A quick tour. Then, if you still insist, I’ll leave.’

Something flickered in her eyes, undercurrents of lust zinging between us. Her gaze dropped to my lips and I almost wanted to crow in triumph. ‘Fine. Let’s go.’

She wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck and I stopped myself from mourning the loss of the sight of her satiny skin.

Even in the cold, my libido was racing feverishly. I cleared my throat. ‘So, what was that with your mother?’

Stubborn fire lit her eyes. ‘I’ll allow you to stay on condition we don’t talk about my mother. Or any member of my family.’

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I didn't protest her condition. Families like mine were complicated and she didn't need to vocalise her feelings towards hers for me to get it. Why that little commonality turned me on, I refused to contemplate.

In silence we walked along a dark red-bricked pavement until we reached a tall iron gate set into a walled-off section of the garden. Pushing it open, we followed the path until we reached a tall hedge the size of a barn door that remained full and thick despite the low temperatures. Wren's hand disappeared between the leaves and a section of the hedge sprang open.

With another glance at me, she stepped inside. I followed and stepped onto two diverging paths. She took the left one, her footsteps barely making a sound on the grass as we walked between tall hedgerows. Further chunks had been cut out intermittently and lower hedges transformed into shapes of animals, with a large space transformed into a picnic area with benches and seats.

We went deeper into the maze, her head bent forward as if weighed down by her emotions. I wanted to reach out and cup my hand over her nape, test the suppleness of her skin, feel that electricity between us. Instead, I shoved my hands into my pockets, willed the urge to pass. Jumping her right now would be the wrong move.

Eventually her steps slowed. 'We're almost at the centre,' she said, her voice low, as if she didn't want to speak.

'How big is this place?'

She shrugged. 'Big enough when you're a child seeking adventure. Not big enough

when you're a teenager, attempting to flee from your demons.'

I wanted to ask about her demons but her pursed lips suggested she already regretted her revealing statement. I tried a different tack, hoping to take her mind off whatever was bothering her. 'Tell me one good memory you have of your maze.'

She didn't speak for several seconds, and I watched as she trailed her fingers over the tall green foliage. 'That's easy. I had my first kiss in here.'

Envy knotted my stomach. 'It was that good?'

She shook her head. 'It was that bad. It's what happened afterwards that makes it a good memory.'

'Tell me more,' I said, intrigued by the barely there but infinitely more genuine smile tugging up the corners of her full lips.

'I told Winslow Parker I didn't want to be kissed.' She shrugged. 'Call me shallow but I didn't want my first kiss to be from a boy named Winslow with a wet nose and clammy hands. He went ahead and stole a kiss anyway. So I blocked the exit to the maze and left him to freeze his arse off for three hours. When I came back to rescue him, he was crying.'

My lips twitched, a wicked part of me enjoying hearing that her first kiss had been less than memorable. 'So you enjoy making boys cry?'

We reached a dead end and she turned to face me. 'If they deserve it? Absolutely.'

A compulsion I didn't want to fight pulled me closer until I towered over her. Until she had to raise her head to meet my gaze. Despite the darkness around us, every inch of her stunning face and graceful neck was exposed to my keen gaze. 'What else do

you enjoy making boys do?’

‘I’m not nine years old any more. I’m a grown woman and I prefer grown men to boys now,’ she murmured, her gaze fixed boldly on mine. A shiver caught her a second later and I drew closer, locking my fingers in the trellised hedge, caging her in.

‘And what do you want this grown man to do for you?’ I asked, aware my voice was gruff with the lustful urges running rampant through my bloodstream.

She stared at me for a minute, then cast her gaze around her, looking a little lost for a minute. ‘Is it bad to say I don’t want to be here? That if I could leave right now, get on a plane and go far away, I would?’

‘Because of your mother?’

Her eyes darkened and she didn’t repudiate me for ignoring her condition. ‘Amongst other things.’

I got it. A long time ago, I’d accepted that it was better my parents lived in another country. Out of sight...out of mind...out of heartache... ‘There’s absolutely nothing wrong with wishing to be elsewhere.’

‘But I can’t, can I?’

I didn’t answer because there was no right answer to that. I was born into a family where bullshit and dysfunction were the norm but where conversely fierce loyalty and absolute dedication to duty were the cornerstones that held most of us together. I suspected the Binghamms were the same.

‘Tell me what you want, Wren,’ I said instead.

I watched a hot, determined look slowly fill her eyes. She shivered again and my gaze dropped to where her nipples had turned into twin points of succulent torture. Whether her body's reaction was from the cold or the arousal gathering heat in her eyes, I wasn't completely sure. Still, I shrugged off my jacket, draped it over her shoulders, wrapped my hands around her trim waist.

And waited.

Slowly, she slicked her tongue over her bottom lip. I bit back a groan as blood gleefully rushed south.

'Distract me,' she said, a mixture of challenge and pleading in the low, thick words that hardened my rousing cock. 'I don't want to go back to the party. I don't want to make stupid small talk. So just...make me stop thinking about all the crap I have to deal with now that...' She stopped and took a shaky breath.

Despite the flames licking through my veins, I hesitated. 'Are you sure?'

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Her gaze grew defiant. ‘Are you a boy or a man, Jasper Mortimer?’

I gave a low laugh. ‘You don’t want to ask me that, even as a challenge.’

‘Why not? Will you punish me?’ Her voice was breathless, edged with sexual anticipation.

My cock leapt to full attention. Jesus. ‘Is that what you really want, Wren? For me to turn you around against this hedge and spank your tight little rump red for daring to question my manhood?’

Her eyes darkened, her mouth parting on a hot little pant. When her hips jerked forward a fraction, I yanked her the rest of the way, until our groins connected. Until she felt the hard, eager rod of my cock against her soft belly.

Hunger exploded over her face, her hands rising to grip my neck. ‘Do your worst,’ she invited with bite.

I fused my mouth to hers in a rough, carnal kiss powered by every single filthy fantasy I’d had about this woman. And there were hundreds. Thousands.

She opened for me immediately, her tongue gliding against mine in an erotic caress that weakened my knees. I tasted it, sucked on it, bit the tip and felt her shudder. Deepening the kiss, I trailed my hands up her flat belly and midriff to cup her soft, heavy breasts. Another moan escaped her, crushed between our lips as the kiss grew even more frantic.

She tasted intoxicating. Like the shot of adrenaline that brought every sense into vivid focus. I brushed my thumbs over the hard peaks of her nipples, then, giving into the wild clamouring, I nudged her zip halfway down her belly and pushed aside her bra. Before her gasp was fully formed, I swooped down and drew the exposed tip into my mouth. I suckled long and deep, then flicked my tongue rapidly over her burning flesh.

Her fingers bit into my nape. ‘God...yes!’

Frantically, I freed the other breast, caught the tip between my fingers and teased. Her fingers gripped my nape, her breathing erratic as she held me to her breasts. After delivering equal amounts of attention to each, I pulled back, again wracked with the need to see her face.

She looked even more spectacular than before. Defiant. Aroused. Wanton.

‘You’re so fucking gorgeous,’ I groaned.

An impatient sound escaped her, intensifying the heat in my veins. Dragging my hands from her breasts, I cupped her bottom, using the firm globes to pull her harder into my erection. She rewarded me by grinding her pelvis against my length, drawing needy sounds from both of us.

‘I really, really want to fuck you, Wren,’ I confessed, my voice a hot mess. ‘I’ve wanted you since you stepped into my boardroom five years ago.’

She gave a cheeky little laugh, her eyes lighting up for the first time tonight. ‘You mean when I turned down your internship offer?’

My fingers tightened on her bottom. ‘I’ll freely admit, I’m still a little salty about that.’

Her smile widened. 'Poor Jasper. Not used to hearing no?'

I smiled in return. 'I'm only sore at losing when what I want goes to a less worthy competitor. We both know why you turned me down.'

She licked her lips, her eyes lingering hungrily on mine. 'Pray, enlighten me.'

I wasn't going to ruin the moment by mentioning our family feud. 'Because neither of us likes to mix business with pleasure,' I said instead, running my thumb over her lower lip. Immediately her teeth nipped at my flesh, drawing a deep groan.

'I'm not going to confirm or deny that assertion.'

'Have it your way. I still want you. Badly.'

Eyes wild with defiance, she nodded eagerly, sucking my thumb into her mouth for a few seconds before she released me. 'Yes.Now.'

I planted a long kiss on her mouth as I lowered her zip. Only to groan when shocking reality hit me. For ten long seconds I remained paralysed. 'Shit.'

'What?' Her voice was beautifully slurred, her gaze hazy with arousal as she stared up at me. I wanted more of that look. Wanted to watch her shatter completely. Wanted to feel her pussy grip my cock as waves of ecstasy rolled over her.

'I don't have a condom,' I confessed through gritted teeth.

She stared at me blankly for a few seconds before disappointment drenched her beautiful face. 'Oh.'

I clenched my jaw tighter, unwilling to let go of this unique moment. 'Are you on the

Pill?’ I asked with more than a little hope. It wasn’t my usual practice. I liked to be in complete control of my sexual fate. But just this once I prayed for ayes.

‘No,’ she replied, pained resignation in her voice.

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‘There are other ways, Wren.’ I pulled her closer, trailed my lips over her jaw until I reached her ear. ‘Let me make you come with my mouth. I want to taste you on my tongue. Lick you dry. You want to be transported? I can’t do it with my cock but I can give you a little relief. Don’t you want that?’

For a moment, she wavered, on the verge of calling quits on this madness. Selfishly, I didn’t want to let her.

‘I will eat you out for as long as you want me to. Think about how much I’ll suffer while you do. You get to ride my face while you torture the hell out of me,’ I invited.

Her fingers clenched harder into my skin. ‘Yes,’ she responded breathlessly. ‘Please. Yes.’

Satisfied that I had her back in the moment with me, I caught the soft fabric of her jumpsuit between my fingers, careful not to wrinkle the material. Normally I wouldn’t care but she had to return to a party filled with gossip-hungry guests and a mother she was clearly locked in tense disagreement with. I didn’t want to draw any more attention to what we’d been doing than necessary.

I trailed my lips back to hers and kissed her hard before releasing her. ‘Take this thing off for me,’ I instructed.

Soft hands drifted down my forearms and wrists and covered mine for a second before she complied. I stepped back, eager for a snapshot of her leaning against her favourite hedge, undressing for me.

When she stepped out of the jumpsuit, I re-draped my jacket over her shoulders to keep her warm.

Call me primitive but the sight of her in my clothing threatened to undo me. With her hair loose and straight and falling around her face, her upper body almost lost in my coat and her lower half almost exposed to the elements, she was breathtaking. Her legs alone were worth an extra minute of worship. But it was cold, and we couldn't stay out here for ever.

With more than a throb of regret, I stepped forward and trailed the backs of my hands up her inner thighs. She gave a soft gasp and quivered. My gaze raced up from her thighs to her face, unwilling to lose a second of her reaction. Her lips were parted, her eyes hooded but not shut. She watched my hand draw closer to where her pussy was hidden behind a layer of sexy black lace.

'Open your legs wider.'

Her gaze rose and caught on mine for a second before she obeyed, widening her stance until I could fit my closed fist at the juncture of her thighs. Slowly I dragged my knuckle lightly against her flesh; from where she was hot and sodden to the swollen nub pushing against the fabric.

She gasped again, thicker, louder, her breath a puff of vapour in the air between us. I repeated the action. She caught her lips between her teeth and moaned.

'You like that?'

She gave a jerky nod, her gaze once again dropping to follow my hand. On the next turn her hips rolled, her body chasing the exquisite sensation. I felt her grow hotter, wetter with need.

‘More,’ she moaned on the next pass.

‘Look at me, Wren.’

Her gaze rose. Defiant fire and deep arousal. God, what a combination. I cupped her chin to hold her gaze, then I slipped my fingers beneath her panty line.

A wet, decadent sound wrapped itself around her gasp as I inserted two fingers inside her. She was hot. And wet. And so damned tight. For the first time in my life I wondered how it would feel to fuck a woman bareback. To replace my fingers with my cock and experience that snug channel sucking me in.

Her hips moved and she gave a greedy little moan. Slowly, I withdrew and pushed back inside her. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes glazed.

‘You’re gorgeous when you’re lost in pleasure. Do you want more, Wren?’

Without replying, she shifted her stance wider, wrapped her hand around my wrist and directed my movements, pressing my fingers inside her.

‘I’ll take that as a yes?’

Despite the rampant arousal coursing through her, her eyes flashed at me, reminding me that beyond this temporary haven of her maze our families detested each other. That she was using me simply because I was here. That any man who happened to be in her vicinity at the right time would probably have done?

No. Every cell in my body rejected that idea.

‘Either you’re too turned on to speak or you’re attempting to make this a party for one.’ I resisted her when she attempted to hasten my movements. I slowed down,

then pressed my thumb against her engorged clit. She shuddered hard, and a hoarse cry broke from her lips. 'Which one is it, Wren?'

'I... I...'

I moved my thumb again and another cry ripped free. 'Do you want me to make you come, baby?'

She hesitated for a mutinous second. Then nodded frantically. 'Yes,' she hissed.

'Then I want to hear exactly how you want it. And I want you to say my name when you do.' I hoped she wasn't dating anyone, but hell if I was going to be a replacement for some absent asshole.

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I circled my thumb and her head jerked back, pushing into the hedge. ‘I want it deeper, Jasper. Faster.’

I smiled in unashamed triumph and increased the tempo. Immediately, she got even wetter...

Bloody hell. Any more and she would blow the top of my head clean off. Or more likely make me blow my load in my pants like a damned schoolboy. But I couldn’t stop fucking her with my fingers any more than I could stop breathing. The sounds she was making from both sets of her lips were driving me insane.

‘Slide two fingers into your mouth for me, baby. Make them nice and wet.’

Her eyes widened but she obeyed my instruction. The sight of her sliding her digits slowly into her mouth was almost too much to bear. Unable to resist, I swooped down and added my tongue to the play, licking her fingers as she withdrew them. Her pussy clenched around my fingers, a sign that she’d enjoyed that little action. I filed it at the back of my mind for next time as she rested her wet fingers against her lips.

‘I have a few ideas of what you can do with those fingers. But I’d love to see you play with your gorgeous nipples.’

Her breath caught then released, and her fingers dropped to one exposed, beaded nipple. Slowly, she circled the bud, gasping as sensation piled high. Then she transferred her attention to the other peak, her breath coming faster as she pleased herself.

Her pussy began to tighten around my fingers, making pushing inside her both a sizzling thrill and a torture. She wetted two more fingers, then, with both hands, tugged and tortured her nipples as I pumped inside her.

In under a minute, she started to unravel. And it was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen.

'Don't stop. Please... I'm close. So close...' Her hips jerked as she chased her bliss. With a sharp cry, she started to come.

Driven by lust, I dropped to my knees and replaced my thumb with my mouth. Gripping her thighs to hold her open, I sucked her clit hard and long.

A keening cry surged up her throat, the sound tormenting me as I groaned and sucked her harder. Rolling convulsions slammed into her, fresh wetness dripping over my lips.

'Jasper!'

Frantic fingers gripped my hair and her whole body shook wildly. I cupped her bottom to hold her steady as her knees weakened and her body sagged. I wanted to eat her pussy for ever, but her frantic whimpers turned a little urgent.

The kind that suggested reality was returning.

I stayed an extra minute, licked her clean with gentle laps of my tongue as her trembling quieted and the hold in my hair loosened. And just for the hell of it and because she was too addictive to resist, I shoved my fingers inside her one last time as I kissed my way up her body to her mouth. Our lips fused and our tongues tangled for another minute while I committed her taste to memory before removing my fingers from her.

Still watching her, I brought my hands to my mouth and licked the last of her taste off. When I was done, I readjusted her knickers and helped her redress.

Silence throbbed between us as she furiously avoided my gaze. I suppressed a sigh and shoved my fists into my pocket to stop myself from reaching for her.

‘Are you okay?’

She stared at me for a handful of seconds before she nodded. ‘Yes.’ Another several seconds drifted by. Then, ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure,’ I replied, my voice more than a little gruff.

Her gaze dropped tellingly to the raging hard-on tenting my trousers. I laughed around the agony of my erection. ‘Believe it or not, watching you come was a pleasure. Maybe we can—’

The words dried in my throat as her expression altered. Within a blink of an eye she was no longer the sated siren at one with the foliage around her.

She was a cool and collected princess, dispensing rejection. ‘This was a one-time thing. Gratefully received but something I intend to forget at the earliest opportunity.’

Disappointment—and, yes, blistering anger because I’d hoped this could be the start of...something—unravelling through me. ‘You think I’m that forgettable, sweetheart?’ I asked, modulating my voice to that deceptive pitch that always confused my opponents. They weren’t sure whether I was pissed off or indulging whatever mood they were in.

Fleeting uncertainty chased across her face before she marshalled it.

‘I do.’ She handed back my jacket, her lips once again curved in that fake, dismissive smile. ‘Because it’s already in the past,’ she said.

‘Like hell it is. We’re going to fuck, Wren. I’m going to make you come many, many more times. It’s simply a matter of when.’

I gave her props for attempting to fight her excitement. She fussed with her hair, rearranged her scarf and tugged her zip another fraction upwards. And when she achieved that facade of outrage, I allowed it. I intended to disprove it at the very next opportunity.

‘I allowed a moment of temporary madness, Jasper. Don’t hold your breath that it’ll happen again.’

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She started to walk away. I shrugged on my jacket and followed. ‘Wren.’

She paused without turning.

I stepped around to face her. ‘I still want to know where your brother is. This time I’m not taking no for an answer.’

The eyes she lifted to mine were haunted, filled with the tension I’d sensed in her all evening. For a handful of seconds, she pressed her lips together. Then her gaze shifted away from mine. ‘I don’t know.’

Instinct suggested she wasn’t lying. ‘When was the last time you heard from him?’

A shaft of pain crossed her flawless features. ‘My mother spoke to him a week ago.’

Her mother. Not her. Was that the reason for the tension between them?

‘I need to reach him, Wren.’

Her face tightened. ‘Is that why you followed me here? To pump me for information?’

I bit back my irritation. ‘We both know what just happened has been a long time coming, pun intended. Don’t demean it.’

Her eyes flickered and I could’ve sworn she blushed. Slightly mollified, I trailed my knuckles over her warm cheek. ‘Doesn’t change the fact that I still need to hear from

Perry, though.’ I dropped my hand. ‘When you do get in touch with him, tell him it’s in his interest to contact me, asap.’ Knowing I needed to leave before I gave in to the urge to re-enact that heady episode again, I stepped away.

‘That sounds like a threat,’ she challenged.

I turned back to the woman I intended to have, again and again, in the very near future, and smiled. ‘You can see it as such if you want. It’s a simple statement that says I’m done playing games. He’s fucking around with something important to me. Sooner or later, he’s going to have to answer to me. How much mercy I show him is entirely up to him.’

CHAPTER TWO

THEFILESOn the desk in front of me had increased three-fold in the last three weeks. Each one was flagged with a red Post-it note that indicated it required urgent attention.

Except three weeks ago, I’d been in front of the desk and Perry behind it. My brother had been the CEO with the full backing of the board of directors at Bingham Industries. Whereas I’d had to fight my way into an acting CEO position, even after Perry finally resurfaced a few days ago and accepted that he needed help.

Unfortunately, it’d been too late to stop the tabloids from splashing his alcohol-fuelled downward spiral on the front pages, plunging the company into a stock-market nightmare and me into a fight to protect my own family firm from ruin.

Bitterness soured my mouth as I inched my chair closer to the desk. I’d been here for fifteen minutes and was yet to reach for the first file.

I couldn’t. Not because I was scared. Far from it. I couldn’t reach for it because

everything in this office reeked of my father. With strong undertones of Perry, the son and heir he'd treasured above everyone else. Including me.

Both hard, intransigent men with firm, ingrained views about a woman's place. Perry had tried to disguise his beneath brotherly concern, but that conceit had been there, inherited from the man he'd looked up to. A man who'd taken reckless risks with the Bingham name and died bitter and broken when those risks had shattered his family.

With hands I refused to let shake, I reached for the phone. My PA answered on the first ring. 'Alana, can you find me a replacement desk asap? Ideally today?'

'I...yes, of course. Right away, Miss Bingham. What do you want done with the old one?'

'Have it couriered to the house in Esher. They can put it in my father's study.'

I set the phone down, took a deep cleansing breath. My position as Acting CEO might well be temporary if I lost my fight against the Big Boys Establishment that were my uncles and cousins. But I intended to do things my way for however long I was here.

And before my stint ends, I'll show them...

That silent vow echoing through me, I picked up the first five files, rose and moved to the chesterfield sofa situated beneath the window. Everything in the office was stuffy and old-school but the chair and coffee table would have to do as a working area until the new desk arrived.

Setting the files down beside me, I opened the first one. Then immediately shut it when the name on the letterhead jumped up at me.

The Mortimer Group

My breath rattled around in my chest, echoing the sensations in my body. Mainly of the hot and bothered kind. Mainly between my legs. All because of Jasper Mortimer and what I'd let happen in the maze a week ago.

I'm done playing games.

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The words might have been aimed at my elusive brother, but they resonated deep within me. Probably because Jasper and I had been playing a game for the better part of five years, ever since I walked into the boardroom at the internship fair and first experienced his dynamic magnetism. Heat flared up my body and I fought a squirm as total recall plunged me into that lustful state that never failed to materialise whenever I thought of him.

That searing, dangerous attraction had partly fuelled my decision to decline his internship offer. That and my family's abiding hatred for everything attached to the Mortimer name.

I tossed the file away. I wasn't ready to deal with him. Or the Mortimer Group. Nor did I want to think of how hard he'd made me come. How wanton he'd made me feel.

How much I'd craved a repeat performance ever since...

That madness in the maze was a shameful episode I'd intended to put out of my mind. If only it'd been that simple—

I jumped when the second office phone, positioned conveniently on the coffee table, rang. I didn't want to picture my brother in this chair, drinking himself into a stupor when he should've been safeguarding our family. Unfortunately, so far all evidence pointed that way.

To stop thoughts of the brother I'd never really got on well with, despite my desire to, I snatched up the phone. 'Hello?' I said, then grimaced at the lack of professionalism. Must do better in future.

‘Congratulations on your official instatement as Acting CEO.’ The deep voice of the last person I wanted to talk to filtered through the handset.

Shock rippled through my body. ‘How do you know about that?’ The board meeting had only ended at ten. It was barely noon. ‘And how did you get my direct number?’

‘I have my ways,’ Jasper Mortimer said.

‘You mean you have a spy in my company,’ I deducted.

He chuckled, a rich, indulgent sound that threw me back to the maze. To his very male groans of satisfaction as I lost my mind. ‘Let’s not start our relationship with accusations.’

‘We don’t have a relationship.’

‘Yet,’ he countered smoothly.

‘We never will. I suggest you accept that now.’

‘Thanks for the suggestion. But how are we going to work together on this Morocco project if we don’t have even a basic rapport?’

My gaze flitted to the file I’d flung away. Something inside me shook. ‘Why are you calling me?’

‘To set up a meeting. The sooner the better.’ The lazy indulgence had left his voice to be replaced by a crisp, uncompromising tone. ‘Now that you’re officially the head of Bingham’s, we need to get this deal back on track.’

The ambitious deal that had, by all accounts, driven Perry over the edge. The thought

hardened my resolve. ‘No.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You heard me. The official Bingham position is that we won’t be going ahead with the Morocco deal. You’ll receive our official statement shortly.’ I hung up before he could reply. Then stared at the silent phone, my heart banging against my ribs.

After five minutes without it ringing, my stomach started churning.

Had I been too reckless? The board I’d battled to win over—the same board who’d expressed their wish to remain leaderless until Perry returned from his six-month rehab stint in Arizona—would love to be proven right that I wasn’t suitable for this position. Had I, with my very first act as CEO, played right into their hands? Tentatively, I reached out towards the phone. To do what? Admit to Jasper that I’d been too rash? Give him an opening to gloat? I snatched my hand back.

He’d waited for a week. He could wait another day.

Resolute, I opened the second file, putting thoughts of Jasper, his masterful fingers and wicked, orgasm-giving tongue out of my mind.

By five p.m. I’d resolved a third of the issues contained within the various files, and unfortunately received even further insight into Perry’s true state of decline—they’d been drastically neglected for months.

My chest tightened the more my thoughts dwelled on my brother. According to the family doctor who’d examined him, he’d been dangerously close to alcohol poisoning, a fact my mother had actively denied even though it’d been an open secret that Perry—like most Bingham men—had harboured a drinking problem for years.

And just like my father, Perry had refused to admit he even had a problem. The board had turned a blind eye to his addiction since he'd managed to keep Bingham Industries above the red line since stepping into Father's shoes seven years ago.

My heart ached as I mourned our deteriorated relationship. Our interaction on the occasions we'd been forced to socialise had been stilted to the point where we'd been relieved to be largely out of each other's orbit for the last three years. Still, his chilled silence when I'd accepted a junior marketing position at another firm had hurt.

Ultimately, he'd been as dismissive of my ambitions as my father had been; he'd fully supported my mother's and aunts' view that I should marry into some wealthy investment family, with guaranteed connections and endless resources, instead of striving to make my own way in the world.

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Tears prickled my eyes and I blinked them away.

The bottom line was, Perry was getting the help he needed and I was in charge of steering Bingham's away from bankruptcy.

Frankly, I was surprised the corporate sharks hadn't started circling already.

My gaze dropped to the royal-blue Bingham's logo on the file I held. Once a powerhouse in its field, my family's logistics and hospitality supply reputation had dropped several rungs in the last decade, forcing us to make poorer business choices that'd led to an even steeper decline.

Was that why Perry had joined forces with Jasper Mortimer? Because while Bingham's had faced significant fiscal woes, the Mortimer Group had grown exponentially, expanding its initial construction arm into several other industries at a breakneck rate that I'd watched with secret awe and, admittedly, a little resentment. How could I not, when a part of me wondered if some of that fortune had been achieved at the cost of my family's decline?

I tossed the file away, irritated with myself for my unhelpful thoughts. Whatever the reason for my family's current situation, nothing would be achieved by dwelling on the past. And especially not thinking of the incident in the maze!

My intercom sounded and I pressed the button with guilty relief. 'Yes?'

'I have a message from a Mr Jasper Mortimer for you.'

My pulse leapt. 'Is he on the phone?'

'No, he just wanted me to tell you he'll call again at six. And that you should make sure you're all read up on the project.' The hint of nerves in Alana's voice made me wonder what else he'd said. And why a sensation a lot like disappointment twisted in my stomach that he hadn't asked to speak to me.

'Thanks, Alana. I'll see you tomorrow.'

I hung up, cursing the untrammelled excitement fizzing through me, then my complete inability to slow my heart's crazy racing as the clock approached six.

Wren picked up on the first ring, and even before she spoke my pulse had rocketed to ridiculous levels. Then came her incredible voice.

'I'd appreciate it if you didn't disturb my assistant with unnecessary messages or me with ultimatums.'

'You made going through her necessary by hanging up on me earlier. I simply used her to let you know we'd be skipping the foreplay this time and getting straight to business. Unless, you specifically want the foreplay?'

'I don't want anything from you, Jasper,' she said briskly.

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes, I'm unique like that, you see.'

I laughed a touch incredulously under my breath. 'You think I don't know that? Believe me, Wren, I do.'

I could've sworn I heard her breath catch, but her voice was curt when she replied, 'Trust a man like you to make allusions.'

I laughed harder, knowing it would irk her more. Cool, calm and collected Wren was intriguing, but I'd discovered I preferred the fiery, passionate woman in the maze who'd lost control, if only for a brief time. 'A man like me? And here I thought, like you, that I was one of a kind...'

'Sadly, you're not as rare a specimen as you think you are.'

I gave a dramatic sigh. 'That just makes me want to prove you wrong.'

'You can't. You won't be able to.'

I gripped the phone tighter, felt myself drawn in deeper into the compulsion I couldn't fight. 'Why not? Because every guy you've been with has made you come as hard as I did in that maze?'

'Seeking validity of your male prowess? How predictable. You disappoint me, Jasper,' she said, her voice a touch huskier.

Despite the curious throb in my chest, I smiled. 'I'm wholly satisfied with my strengths, thanks.' But you weren't always, were you? I pushed away the taunting voice. 'As for seeking validity, the end result in that maze is all the validity I need where you're concerned.'

'Can we get off that subject, please?' she whispered fiercely. 'I don't have time for personal conversation.'

'Do you despise me as much as you pretend to, or is this you simply toeing the family line?' I taunted, a sudden restlessness prowling inside me.

She inhaled sharply. ‘You’ll never get the chance to find out. Goodbye, Mr Mortimer.’

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‘Before you dramatically hang up on me again, let me remind you that your continued failure to engage with me only brings Bingham’s closer to being in breach of contract.’

‘I’ve read the file. Nothing in there remotely suggests a breach,’ she said tightly, and I got the feeling I’d upset her by that family comment.

Bloody hell.

I tried to get my head back into business mode. ‘May I suggest that you read the paperwork again. Carefully.’

Silence greeted me and I imagined her bristling, those eyes flashing with low-burning anger. I wondered what she’d look like in full blaze. God, it’d be glorious.

‘I graduated university at the top of my class. You know this because you came sniffing around, trying to headhunt me, remember?’

‘I remember you turning me down flat and accepting an internship at a much more inferior company.’ That still grated, but it’d been the first inkling for me that, all these decades later, the Bingham’s were still as bitter about the fallout between our families. Now I knew the depths of my father’s ruthlessness, I wasn’t surprised. ‘Do you regret that decision?’

‘Not for a single moment. So I can only conclude you’re trying to insult me by insinuating I would’ve missed something as crucial as a break clause in a contract.’

I took a beat to formulate my reply because this was where it got tricky. Saying anything negative against Perry might backfire. And as much as I liked tussling with Wren, the project I'd worked my arse off for needed to be kept on track. 'No offence intended. But the clause is there, I assure you. I can courier over a copy if you'd like?'

'Now you're implying I'm sloppy with paperwork. And blind, too?'

'You seem hell-bent on taking offence no matter what I say. A meeting will resolve this quickly enough, don't you think? Even if it's so you can put me in my place?'

'Inviting me to prove you wrong won't work, either. I don't need my ego stroked.'

It was time to pull out the big guns. 'I suggest you make time in your schedule. I'm not losing this deal because of some chip you've got on your shoulder. I expect to see you in my office tomorrow.'

'Or what?'

'Or I'll have no choice but to make good on my promise. You're already mired in unwanted publicity. Divorcing yourself from this deal at this late stage is going to bring nothing but unwanted attention to Bingham's.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'I'm laying out the course of action I'll be forced to take if you remain intransigent. The ball is in your court, sweetheart.'

She hung up.

Despite the two-nil score against me, I wasn't overly disgruntled. She hadn't earned

her position by being dismissive of a potential lawsuit. Not that it'd come to that. For starters, I wasn't champing at the bit to become the Mortimer incapable of closing my division's biggest deal yet. The labels my father had callously and frequently branded into my skin were enough.

No, I was willing to bet my very treasured vintage Aston Martin that Wren would make contact. And if not...

I smiled grimly to myself as I swivelled in my chair to enjoy my multimillion-pound view...

If not, I'd take delight in becoming a very significant pain in her delectable backside.

The break clause wasn't in the contract.

Jasper's insinuation that I'd missed something had spurred a wild need to prove him wrong. After a two-hour search, I'd given up and headed home. Nothing in the electronic or paper files showed Perry had agreed to an early break clause. Sure, there were several clauses—all dishearteningly skewed in favour of the Mortimer Group—peppered within the contract but nothing that stated what would happen if Perry changed his mind about proceeding with the Morocco deal. Because he hadn't planned on it? Like my father, had he gone into this with unshakeable hubris, only to fall?

My heart twisted in dull pain and a little shame for assuming his culpability. He wasn't here to defend himself. And for all I knew, Jasper had twisted his arm into agreeing to this deal. The man was clever enough.

And not just with his words.

My heart skipped a beat and shame deepened, but for a completely different reason.

Our heated verbal exchange had sparked something to life inside me. Something that, hours later, made me feel restless. Needy. I'd been spoiling for an argument. Then ended up spoiling for something totally different. Something to ease the ache between my thighs.

Like his mouth. His fingers.

His cock.

I pressed my fingers into my eyes, hoping to erase the image of him looking far too handsome for my sanity at the party. But the images simply reeled...of him caging me against the maze hedge. Of him on his knees, enthusiastically bringing me to an insane climax. Hell, even watching him suffer with that incredible hard-on had turned me on. God, what the hell was wrong with me?

You need to get laid.

I dropped my hands in frustration. If only it were that simple. Despite my short, rebellious modelling stint, I was a Bingham, cognisant of my ever-increasing family responsibility. The tabloids would love nothing better than to splash the front pages with details of whatever brief hook-up I indulged in for the sake of getting my rocks off. Especially now I was Acting CEO of a once multimillion-pound company now on the brink of collapse.

While my last two relationships hadn't worked due to lack of chemistry, behind it was the same resentment that had led me into modelling at nineteen. Resentment and rebellion stemming from my mother's attempt to orchestrate those relationships.

Unable to control either my father or Perry, she'd turned her attention to me the moment I reached puberty. Attention I'd mistakenly believed was affection I'd sorely missed in my childhood years when I'd needed her most. Discovering that she was simply using me to while away her time until her husband or son needed her, whereupon she set me back on my isolation shelf, had hurt long before I'd reached maturity. Of course, it didn't stop the foolish hope that sprang inside me whenever she turned her attention on me.

Not until lately. Not until her indifference—identical to Perry's—to my announcement that I'd accepted a marketing position at a different company had forced me to accept that true affection or acknowledgement from her would never happen. I was merely an ornament to be displayed when it suited her.

More fool me...

Exhaling through another tide of hurt, I padded over to the window, while parsing Jasper's parting words. He wanted Bingham's to hold up their end of the deal, agree to a three-year plan to supply the hospitality infrastructure for the four luxury hotels and casinos he was building in Morocco.

On the surface, it sounded like a deal made in heaven, but the reality was that Bingham's would be operating at an eighty per cent loss for the first year with possible gains coming only in the second and third years. Perry had tried to push for a five-year contract. Jasper had refused. Because like a typical Mortimer, he wanted to keep the initial financial gains for himself.

Well, I wasn't going to let the past repeat itself. The maze incident and our phone call tonight had proven two things: this insane attraction between us that made me want to tear off his clothes when he was within touching distance was untenable, and working with Jasper would be a nightmare.

The man was too full of himself. And I was woman enough to recognise that not all battles needed to be fought. Besides, I had several ideas of how to put the resources Perry had earmarked for the Mortimer deal to better use.

Striding over to my phone, I checked my schedule for the next day, then slotted a half-hour to deal with Jasper. It wouldn't take more than that to send the message home.

And if my belly somersaulted and my pulse raced at the thought of tangling with him again...it was only because I looked forward to emerging the victor.

Nothing else.

I strode through the doors of Mortimer Tower after business hours the next day, power-suited and determined not to be impressed with my surroundings. The

reminder that all of this had been built by cut-throat Mortimers helped me focus as I entered the executive lift that serviced the upper floors where Jasper's office was located.

A part of me regretted leaving this meeting until last thing on Friday. If I'd tackled it first thing this morning, I'd already be free of this disquieting...thrumming in my veins. My brain wouldn't keep flashing scenarios of what could happen when I saw him again. I wouldn't have wasted precious stretches of time replaying his promise that 'We're going to fuck, Wren' and 'I'm going to make you come many, many more times'.

I sure as hell wouldn't be riding the empty lift with trembling hands and panties slightly damp from that memory of him going down on me in my family maze.

Enough, already...

The self-admonition worked for the thirty seconds it took for the lift to spit me out into the pristine, ultra-sleek reception area. The whole building had been redecorated recently at huge expense by Bryce Mortimer, the award-winning architect in the Mortimer clan. I might have ignored the impressive atrium downstairs, but I couldn't avoid the burst of bold colours softening the sharply angled steel and dark grey surfaces.

A smartly dressed receptionist smiled as I sucked in a breath and approached her.

'Hi, I have a meeting with Jasper Mortimer. He's expecting me.' Half true. Jasper might have summoned me here today but I hadn't bothered to inform him when I would be making my appearance.

Her smile slipped. 'Is he? Only, he went into a meeting ten minutes ago.'

‘We didn’t agree on a specific time. Just show me to his office. I’ll wait.’

‘Of course, Miss Bingham. Right this way.’

The greys were more pronounced than the steel in Jasper’s office and the colours came from art rather than flower arrangements, but the effect was the same—sleekly professional, contemporary and elegant. But what made the space different was his lingering scent in the air, coupled with the aura of power I couldn’t dismiss as I stared at the immense dark-wood desk and black high-backed chair, and I couldn’t help the shiver that coursed down my spine. A throat cleared beside me. Composing myself, I glanced at the receptionist. ‘Thank you.’

‘Can I get you anything?’

I started to refuse, then changed my mind. ‘Coffee with cream, no sugar. Thank you.’

She nodded and glided away. I returned my gaze to my surroundings, noting the absence of files or paperwork. Either Jasper was naturally meticulous in maintaining a paper-free environment or he’d anticipated my arrival. My instinct suggested the latter, eroding a layer of that upper hand I’d hoped to gain by my unexpected arrival.

After the receptionist served my coffee and left, I sat on the wide grey velvet sofa facing the spectacular view of the Thames and attempted to immerse myself in Bingham business. I wasn’t sure where the notion of how to handle Jasper came from. All I knew was that it happened somewhere between sipping the excellent java brew—purportedly supplied to every Mortimer establishment by Graciela Mortimer—and when the door suddenly sprang open to reveal Jasper Mortimer in all his breathtaking glory.

Perhaps I sensed the moment I saw his face that walking away wasn’t going to be as easy as I’d convinced myself. Here, in this space, in his domain, I realised my first

mistake—we should've met on neutral ground.

Because the man striding towards me teemed with quietly ferocious purpose. And yes, regardless of how late it was, he'd known I would come. 'Sorry for the wait. I couldn't get out of the meeting as quickly as I wanted. Do you mind?' He pointed to the coffee on the tray.

I shook my head. 'Go ahead.'

He poured himself a cup, added a dash of cream, and took a seat next to me.

Immediately, his dark woodsy smell engulfed me. The strong, visceral urge to breathe him in made me lift my own cup, hoping the coffee smell would dilute the potency of his scent.

That particular quest became redundant because my gaze was on a mission of its own. It took in the strong fingers lifting the cup to his lips for a large gulp, then followed the lines of his throat as he swallowed. The play of his powerful thighs as he crossed his legs and set the cup and saucer on his knee.

'First things first, did you come across the clause we talked about?'

His assumption that I'd gone looking set my teeth on edge. But I answered anyway. 'No, I didn't. We must be looking at different documents because there's nothing in my copy of the contract to support what you're saying.'

Jasper's hazel gaze narrowed on me for a tight, long stretch. Then he set his cup down, rose and crossed to his desk. When he returned with a sleek laptop, my heart lurched, then dropped to my toes as he fired up the machine. A few taps and he turned the screen to face me.

'Perry signed this document down the corridor in my conference room three months ago. It was duly witnessed, and I couriered him a copy for his records. The break clause in question is on page forty-seven.'

With not quite steady hands, I placed my cup on the coffee table and took the laptop. I wanted to blurt out that the presence of the break clause didn't change anything. But I couldn't delude myself. Break clauses were notoriously costly and I suspected Bingham would end up shouldering the burden if I didn't play my cards right.

That outlandish idea that struck me five minutes ago returned, more forcefully, as I read the document. It looked similar to my copy except for the crucial page missing from mine.

'Why is this one different from mine?'

Jasper didn't answer immediately. He drained his coffee before glancing my way. 'Negotiations with your brother weren't...smooth. He insisted on renegotiating several contracts before things were finalised.'

Given Perry's debilitated state, I wasn't surprised. But a question had been gnawing at me since I became aware of this deal. 'Why Bingham's? There are literally thousands of companies out there you could've partnered with. Why us?'

His lips firmed. 'You mean considering our family history?'

He wasn't beating about the bush. I didn't see why I should. 'Yes.'

'Would you believe me if I said that ultimately didn't factor into my decision?'

Who was he kidding? 'No, I wouldn't.'

He sighed. 'Didn't think so. Wren, if you're asking then I'm going to presume Perry didn't tell you.'

'Tell me what?'

Hazel eyes locked on to mine, pinned me in place. ‘That he begged me for this deal. He pretty much stalked me for the better part of three months before I even agreed to meet with him. I was all set to go with someone else.’

A flush of shame crept up from my belly and soon engulfed my whole body. I’d seen the books. We were in a precarious financial position. But we weren’t crawling-on-our-bellies desperate. Yet. Not enough for Perry to beg for scraps from our sworn enemy. ‘I’m not sure why he did that—’

‘Aren’t you?’ Jasper’s expression was entirely cynical.

Pride swarmed through me. ‘No, we’re not destitute. I’m not going to lower myself to prove it to you. You’ll have to take my word for it.’

He frowned. ‘No need to be so defensive. I’m simply relating things as they happened. For whatever reason your brother wanted this deal to happen.’

‘Then why did he drag his feet?’

Jasper’s lips twisted. ‘At least you’re admitting he did.’

I handed him back his laptop. ‘Clearly he wasn’t satisfied with something. I’ve looked at the projections. We supply you with everything from gambling tables and staff to tea towels and garden fertiliser but see very little profit for twelve months? Why the hell should I come on board with something like that?’

His gaze hardened and I caught a glimpse of Hugh Mortimer, the adversary my father had faced—and lost to—decades ago. Was Jasper his father’s son in every sense of the word? Whatever. I didn’t intend to stick around to find out.

‘Because he signed on the dotted line. It’s too late to back out now. This project has

been delayed by months already. I won't let it suffer another setback,' he said grimly.

I rose from the sofa, gathered my tablet and briefcase as calmly as I could, despite the roiling in my stomach. I'd seen the books. Our company was haemorrhaging money, yes, but we still had substantial assets to hold back the dam for a while. 'I'll look over your papers and get back to you.'

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He rose to join me. Despite my above average height, he towered over me, made me feel small and delicate in a way very few people could. And... I didn't exactly hate that feeling. Which was totally absurd. I turned away as he glanced at his watch.

'Let me take you out to dinner. We can discuss this over—'

'No, thanks. I only eat with people I trust.'

His eyes darkened. 'Ouch,' he drawled without a hint of the purported affront. 'You really are determined to make this adversarial, aren't you?'

For some reason, the softly voiced accusation niggled, striking me with a wild urge to apologise. Stay strong. 'I'm just looking out for my family's best interests.'

That brought a wry, twisted smile to his lips. 'Can't say I blame you, but I'm really not the enemy here, Wren.'

God, the way he said my name—that name I'd hated for so long—somehow sounded pleasant on his lips. 'If you're not the enemy, then agree to end this amicably,' I replied.

His smile turned edgy, delivering another glimpse of the true man beneath the suave exterior. 'I haven't made it this far by being sentimental over business, Wren. I'm a little disappointed you would play that card. Your brother signed an agreement. I expect you to honour it. Starting on Monday, you'll devote the required time and energy into progressing this deal.'

‘Or what?’ I dared, even though my stomach dipped wildly. There was something raw and primal in that command, something that incredulously turned my blood hotter, my skin more sensitive. With a compulsion I couldn’t deny, my gaze dropped to his lips. Mine tingled, a need to taste him almost overpowering me. It was enough to make me take a step back. But I wasn’t totally out of his reach. So when he raised his hand and slowly extended it towards my face, there was absolutely no reason not to take another step away. Out of the path of temptation. Except I didn’t.

His knuckles brushed my cheek, slowly caressing down to my jaw. Electricity charged up my thighs, making me bite back a gasp. Why the hell was I getting so wet? Dear God...

‘You say you’re looking out for your family? Then what was that in that maze last week? Was it a touch of much-needed self-indulgence? One you wouldn’t be averse to repeating?’

‘I...no.’

‘Try that once more, with feeling. But before you do, remember my promise. I intend to fuck you, Wren. Very hard and very thoroughly. In every position you desire.’

My clit throbbed and fresh flames shot through me at the thick drawled words. Suddenly, I was very aware of the sofa nearby. That all I had to do was say the word and I’d have him.

But then what? He would be just another temporary act of rebellion that could go nowhere when I should be concentrating on dragging my family’s company out of the quagmire. Perry was in rehab. The last thing I should be doing was adding flames to a roaring scandal-hungry fire by embarking on a tryst with the enemy.

‘Business,’ I insisted, even as a thick coil of regret unravelled inside me, reminding

me of how many times I'd denied myself for the sake of family. 'I'm here to discuss business. Nothing else.'

That overconfident smile returned, turning his far too gorgeous face even more spectacular as his hand dropped. 'Good. Then do the right thing. Or you'll leave me no choice but to fight your hot little fire with flames of my own,' he answered, a growl of anticipation in his voice that hastened my heartbeat.

'You don't want to go to war with me, Jasper.'

'To get this deal done, I'll take you however I can get you, sweetheart.'

Much too late, I took that vital step back. Then another. 'Goodnight, Jasper.'

'Would you like me to walk you out?' he asked, right after his hooded gaze circumvented my body, leaving me even hotter than before.

'I can manage on my own, thanks,' I replied, aware my voice was a little hoarse when I needed it snippy.

'Okay. I'll see you on Monday for the phase two meeting at nine a.m. Don't be late.'

I turned and walked away without answering. In the lift, I sagged against one wall, a traitorous little tremble seizing my body as snippets of the conversation scrolled across my brain. Nothing had gone as I'd smugly predicted. If the agreement he'd shown me was valid—and I didn't see why it would be fabricated—it meant Perry had agreed to a deal that would be impossible to walk away from without seriously crippling Bingham's. So why had he signed it? And why had he left it out of the file?

My phone pinged as the lift reached the ground floor. I stared at the text, my heartbeat hammering as I saw the familiar-looking number. Jasper.

I've emailed you a copy of the agreement for your records.

I checked my email and, sure enough, the agreement was in my inbox. I tapped out a reply as I walked through his stunning atrium, once again determined not to admire its grandeur.

Email received. Thanks.

I discovered other hidden bombshells once I was back home in my maisonette in Fulham, showered and dressed in my favourite pyjama shorts set. The glass of red wine was forgotten in my hand as I read and reread the agreement, tiny waves of shock building into a tsunami as I absorbed just what Perry had committed Bingham's to.

Besides the supply agreement, which would eat heavily into our cash reserves, Perry had agreed to being on hand, day or night, to troubleshoot any problems that arose either in London or on sites in Morocco for a minimum of twenty hours per week. To 'help' with that particular clause, Jasper had offered the use of his empty office in London or a suite in the Morocco hotel.

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Even before I'd taken up the mantle at Bingham's I was working long hours. Hard work had earned me a fast track from junior to senior executive in my last firm. Adding a few more hours to my workday didn't faze me. What disturbed me was the thought of being that close to Jasper. Because when he'd touched me tonight, every cell in my body had roared to life in a way that shocked me.

I downed the rest of the wine, set the glass down and reclined on my sofa. I had the rest of the weekend to figure a way out of this.

For Perry's sake. For my family's sake, I couldn't fail.

Eyes closed, I tried to work out how to best the man with the wicked tongue and clever fingers.

I'll take you however I can get you...

Why did those words make me so hot? Why the hell couldn't I get his voice out of my head?

I'll take you...

I was flushed and panting as my hand crept down my belly. I bit my lip, hating myself a little for succumbing to the lust trickling through my blood. My nipples beaded as sensation unfurled in my pelvis, heating my pussy and engorging my clit. Uncustomary anticipation fired me up, my fingers tingling as I spread my legs and slipped my fingers beneath the waistband of my pyjama shorts.

A hot little gasp left my lips when I touched myself, shivering when I noticed how wet and slippery I was.

I'll take you...

Need and lust built. My fingers worked my clit in desperate circles, the realisation that, for once, I didn't need the assistance of my trusted vibrator, ramping up my desire. Working my clit with my thumb, I slipped my middle finger inside my wet heat, finger-fucking myself while I imagined thicker fingers filling me. Or a cock... Jasper Mortimer's cock.

Inside me.

Pounding me.

Making me scream.

My orgasm curled through me, arching my back off the sofa as liquid bliss drowned me from head to toe.

It was as I came down from that intense high, my heartbeat roaring in my ears, that a line from the agreement suddenly flashed across my mind.

I jackknifed off the sofa, almost knocking over the wine glass as I reached for the laptop. And there, on page fifty-one, was my answer, my saviour, in black and white.

I read and reread it for good measure.

The Mortimer Group has the right to terminate this agreement, with due notice, in the case of non-performance by Bingham Industries. This includes, but is not limited to, continued disruption of services...

I smiled.

For now, Jasper Mortimer had the power. I was going to take it from him by simply doing...nothing.

Even while I blew his mind out of the boardroom.

CHAPTER THREE

WREN WAS FORTY-FIVE minutes late. Irritated, I hit my intercom button again.

‘Yes, sir?’ my PA answered.

‘Try her mobile again. If she doesn’t answer, call her office. I want to know where she is,’ I growled.

‘Of course.’

Why I expected Trish to succeed when my own numerous calls had gone straight to voicemail was a mystery but it beat just sitting around fuming because Wren was a no-show. I’d hoped providing her with the valid copy of the agreement would make her see sense but, clearly, I’d overestimated her.

Jaw gritted, I acknowledged that my disappointment in her was more acute than it’d ever been with her brother. Yes, I loved a challenge and I’d known getting involved with Bingham’s, all things considered, would be difficult, but I’d convinced myself I could handle it.

Handle her.

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When the hell was I going to learn my lesson? Bitterness rose up to fuse with my annoyance. I tamped down both emotions. I wasn't dealing with my father's scathing remarks, disparaging me about wanting peace when we Mortimers were a proudly bloodthirsty lot.

I was dealing with an intelligent, if extremely stubborn, woman. I needed another way to deal with her.

Immediately my mind flew back to the maze, as it had been doing increasingly over the past week or so, but especially since Friday night. It'd taken every ounce of willpower not to kiss her in my office. But I'd needed to prove to her that I wasn't driven by my desire.

Succumbing to the urge to keep touching her, to kiss those luscious lips, would only convince her I was driven by base instincts. Yet I couldn't deny that she only needed to flash those green eyes to trigger a fever in my blood.

I laughed under my breath. I'd had my share of women, some more beautiful than Wren. This rare phenomenon where she was concerned was inexplicable. Why the hell did she trigger this strong reaction in me?

I shook my head, growing more annoyed when I clocked that I'd wasted almost an hour waiting for her. About to open one of the many files that needed my attention, I paused when my intercom buzzed.

'Yes?' I responded, a little too eagerly.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Mortimer, I couldn’t reach her. Her secretary says she’s in a meeting.’

‘I know. She’s supposed to be in a meeting, here, with me.’ Aware that I was snapping at my PA, I throttled down my emotions. Christ, she drove me crazy. ‘Thanks, Trish.’ I collapsed in my seat, forcing calm into my bones.

I’d always been a strategist. A planner. Favouring dialogue over conflict. But I was a Mortimer, as my father had taken delight in reminding me every time I’d displayed what he’d termed my weakness. Did Wren really want war with a Mortimer?

Especially when Bingham’s, according to trusted sources, was one ill-judged deal away from complete collapse? She couldn’t afford to take me on in a corporate battlefield. So why the hell was she trying? Perry had been equally hard-headed but evidently his intransigence had been mostly fuelled by alcohol. Wren was simply stubborn.

And loyal. Perhaps blindly so, but loyal.

It was a stark reminder that my family was acutely different. Mortimers—my father especially—didn’t do blind loyalty and, as he’d proven with his callous desertion, wouldn’t fight to the death for anyone else but himself.

But wasn’t that what had made us who we were today? Successful. Feared. A global powerhouse with immeasurable clout. Sure, we wouldn’t win any Family of the Year prizes but there was a lot to be proud of. I wasn’t going to let a woman with brains, beauty and fireworks in her green eyes convince me otherwise—

As if I’d conjured her up by my imagination, my door opened and there she stood.

My annoyance didn’t recede as I stared at her, but several new sensations crowded in. First, the jolt of electricity just the sight of her rammed through my body. I attempted

to control it by taking another deep breath. And failed.

The second was utter shock as I took in the state of her.

She looked as if she'd stumbled in from a night of hard partying. And even harder fucking. Her hair was dishevelled as if some lucky bastard had won the privilege of running his fingers repeatedly through it. Her lips were faintly bruised and smeared as if someone had eaten off her lipstick. Then came her smudged make-up. Dark jealousy spiralled through me as my gaze dropped lower and my gut tightened against the inevitable hard-on heading my way as I took in the rest of her.

Holy hell, she was wearing a trench coat. Not necessarily a fashion faux pas considering the time of year, but it was tightly belted at the waist in that highly suggestive sexual way that screamed she was wearing very little or nothing at all underneath. Fire lit through my groin as she took a step towards me and justified my suspicions by flashing a bare leg.

Jesus, she wouldn't. Would she?

'Good morning, Jasper.' Whether that husky greeting was deliberately exaggerated or the result of long hours of screaming in ecstasy wasn't something I particularly wanted to dwell on. Either way, it threw another gallon of flammable fuel on my libido. I clenched my gut as I grew even harder.

'You're late,' I bit out, watching her strut across my office in sky-high heels.

With each step, I caught a glimpse of her leg, and nothing else. My nape heated and I desperately scrounged around for every scrap of willpower not to drag my fingers over my jaw and stop myself from salivating like a pathetic dog. I tried to remain pissed off, but my mind fixated on one thing.

Was Wren Bingham totally naked under that coat?

She reached my desk, laid her hands flat on it, and leaned towards me. I kept my eyes on hers, determined not to be drawn into whatever game she was playing.

‘Am I? You said the meeting was at ten. It’s now...’ she paused, glanced around the office before reaching into her pocket for her phone ‘...nine fifty-nine. Oh, look, I’m a whole minute early.’ She waved her phone at me and I caught a glimpse of her home screen.

It featured a picture of her, head thrown back, laughing into the camera. The image only showed her from bare shoulders up but it was again suggestive that she was naked. Arousal attacked my body, leaving me with a serious urge to fidget. I steepled my fingers on my belly, thankful my suit jacket and desk hid my compromised state from her.

‘I told you the meeting was at nine o’clock. I’ve had to put off the Moroccan team twice already.’

‘Heavens! In that case I can only apologise. There must have been some sort of mix-up.’ She slipped the phone back into her pocket, the movements exaggerated enough to make her coat gape wide. I saw the curve of her breast and swallowed hard.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ I bit out.

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Her eyes widened. 'I don't know what you mean, Jasper.'

'Do you attend all your meetings dressed like that?'

'You don't like what I'm wearing?'

I gritted my teeth, knowing I was getting close to the danger zone. 'We abide by a dress code here.'

Her smile. 'Ah, but then I don't work for you, do I, Jasper?' she asked softly, but there was a hard glint in her eye, a stubborn flame flaring to life.

Before I could answer, my phone rang. I allowed myself a small smile as I met her gaze. 'You're right. You don't work for me. But we're working together and I expect professionalism, like being on time. I'll let it slide just this once.' I reached for my phone. 'Yes?' My PA relayed the information I wanted to hear, and I hung up. 'Are you ready?'

She tensed. 'Ready for what?'

'I told you I rescheduled the videoconference. The Morocco team is waiting for us in the conference room. Since you made the effort to come all this way despite being late, I'm assuming you'll join me?'

I watched her jaw drop, her whole act vanishing for a second before she composed herself. 'Of course, lead the way. I hope they're just as accommodating as you about my tardiness,' she said, her voice saccharine sweet.

I managed to stop my teeth gritting as I rose, buttoned my jacket and rounded the desk. The last thing I wanted to do was to walk her through my open-plan office floor dressed as she was. Call me a chauvinist but having every guy out there wondering what she was wearing under that coat made my blood boil.

But...business was business. And I wasn't about to let this deal fall apart over yet another hurdle.

I stepped out of my office, keenly aware that she was following, those sky-high heels perfectly displaying her spectacular endless legs with every step. Of course, as I'd feared, seemingly every male in the vicinity suddenly needed to be in the hallway leading to the conference room right at that moment.

Avid eyes gravitated to Wren, her sexily dishevelled state triggering more than one male fantasy. I hurried into the conference room, barely stopping myself from snarling at my own employees as I shut the door behind us.

Strolling to the head of the table, I grabbed the remote and flicked it on. The four women and three men who made up the Moroccan executive team stared back at us. Then, one by one, they switched their attention to Wren. Eyes widened, and wild speculation flickered across their faces.

I cleared my throat, rearranging what I suspected was a scowl into professional neutrality. 'Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies again for the delay. Let me introduce you to Wren Bingham. As of today, she'll be taking over Bingham Industries' side of the project.' I glanced at Wren, who'd taken the seat across from me.

She was staring at the screen with a sultry, faintly challenging smile. As I watched, she swivelled her seat towards the screen, dragging one hand slowly through her long hair before flicking it over one shoulder. With her other hand she waved at the team. 'Hi, it's lovely to meet you all,' she murmured, right before she crossed her mile-long

legs.

I didn't need to be on her side of the table to know she was flashing more than a hint of thigh. The expressions on the screen—especially the male ones—telegraphed her effect on them, plain as day. Silence reigned in the room as their gazes flicked between Wren and me.

Bloody hell.

‘Wren?’ I prompted, aware of the bite in my voice.

She slanted green eyes at me and blinked slowly. ‘Yes, Jasper?’

‘Are you going to give the Bingham briefing? The team is pretty much on page as to where the Mortimer side of things stand. They need you to confirm the various timetables for delivery of phase two. You did get up to speed on where we are, didn't you?’

Her eyes flashed irritation at me but she maintained her bored expression. ‘Oh... Right. Phase two...’ She didn't say anything else, just continued to stare at me with those eyes.

‘Yep. Phase two. Don't keep us in suspense,’ I taunted, ignoring the stares from the screen as our intrigued audience watched our silent battle, suddenly enjoying this tussle with her.

She shrugged, indicating she was going to do just as she pleased. That she was going to enjoy watching me twist in the wind.

After another stretch of mutinous silence, I swivelled my chair towards the screen. ‘My apologies, but I didn't quite make a full introduction, did I? I should have

mentioned that Wren has a master's degree in Business from Oxford University.'

I felt her gaze sharpen on me. 'She was recently featured in Business Tomorrow's Young CEOs Under Thirty. She's too modest to tell you herself, but she graduated at the top of her class and, according to one of her professors, she has one of the most brilliant business minds of her generation.'

'Stop it,' she hissed under her breath for my ears only.

I ignored her. She wasn't going to win this game. 'I tried to poach her even before she'd finished university but, alas, I lost her to another company. So I guess you can imagine how stoked I am to finally have her on board?' I flicked a mocking smile her way before returning my gaze to the team. 'The reason she doesn't have any files with her this morning is because she doesn't really need them. All the facts and figures she requires are right up there in that exceptional brain of hers. On top of her many accomplishments, she also possesses a photographic memory. I haven't seen it in action myself but I'm dying to. Wren?' I prompted again, finally focusing on her, the gauntlet writhing on the table between us.

Hellfire erupted from her gaze as her hands balled into fists.

I smiled inside, satisfaction eroding my irritation. She'd meant to test me by pretending lack of interest, boredom, even apathy. But the one thing Wren Bingham couldn't do was let our audience walk away with the impression that she was dumb. I suspected, like me, she'd fought too hard for her accomplishments and her true place in her family to let herself be so easily dismissed.

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When she swallowed, surreptitiously pulled the lapels of her coat together and slowly uncrossed her legs, I allowed myself an inner fist pump.

Uncurling her hands, she glanced at the screen. ‘What do you need to know about phase two?’ she asked, the sexy seduction in her voice gone.

At my nod, the team launched into their questions. As I’d suspected, Wren knew the project inside and out. She answered every query concisely, offering alternatives when needed without once requesting information from me or consulting the electronic documents I’d emailed her yesterday.

When the meeting ended and the screen went blank forty minutes later, she surged to her feet. ‘You think you’re very clever, don’t you?’ she snapped.

I reclined in my seat, taunting her with a smile. ‘Don’t throw a hissy fit just because your little game backfired on you, sweetheart,’ I drawled.

Luscious lips pressed together as she raked her fingers through her hair, immediately making my imagination run wild about the array of sexual things I could do with every strand of that hair. ‘This isn’t going to work.’

I waved a hand at the screen. ‘You just proved otherwise. It’ll work even better if only you’d stop playing these silly games.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘What makes you think I won’t just let you list my accomplishments then show you up anyway next time?’

I shrugged. 'I don't. But I can guarantee that I'll keep coming up with different ways to ensure that you don't get away with whatever you have up your sleeve.'

She threw up her hands in exasperation, the closest I'd come to seeing her lose her cool. 'Why don't you do us both a favour and just end this?'

I exhaled slowly. 'I don't get it. Going ahead with this deal will benefit both of us.'

She performed a perfect pirouette and headed for the door. 'Keep telling yourself that,' she threw over her shoulder. 'In the meantime, I'm going to make it my business to make sure that you regret this.' She reached for the door handle. Started to turn it.

Everything inside me clenched tight. 'Wren.'

Fingers frozen, she glared at me over her shoulder.

'Please tell me you're not naked under that coat.'

That slow, cock-stroking smile returned, deadlier than before. 'I'm not naked under this coat, Jasper,' she echoed with a siren voice that transmitted straight to my groin. Then to taunt me further, her fingers dropped to toy with the loops of the belt. 'Would you like me to show you?'

Lust rushed through my blood, making me steel hard in moments. But I remained silent, swallowing down the ones that clawed at my throat. Without shifting her gaze from mine, she tugged on the belt. Her coat loosened and gaped. From where I sat, I couldn't see, but anyone who chose to enter in that moment would.

My stomach knotted and I lost the ability to breathe. 'Fucking hell,' I muttered under my breath.

‘What was that?’ she asked with false, wide-eyed innocence.

‘I said keep that damn door closed, Wren.’

‘Ah, I could’ve sworn you said something else.’

‘Jesus, what are you doing?’ I rasped, forgetting that I was meant to keep my cool.

‘I’m going back to my office. I’m assuming we’re done here?’ she asked, one shapely eyebrow quirked.

My gaze dropped down the coat, fighting the urge to stand, rush over to her to see for myself what she was baring to the door. ‘You know what I’m asking. What are you doing with all that?’ I jerked my chin at her attire.

Her smile deepened. ‘Why, nothing. Not yet, anyway.’

Her hand dropped from the door. My throat clogged with tension as she slowly retied the belt, cinching it even tighter so her trim waist was fully displayed. My fingers itched with the need to capture that waist. I bunched them to stop myself from acting on the feelings rampaging through me.

‘I need you back here tomorrow to discuss the casino outfitting.’

‘I have a full day tomorrow.’

‘Then we’ll meet after you’re done,’ I countered, and watched her nostrils flare.

‘I work pretty long hours. Are you sure you want to wait up for me? I wouldn’t want to disturb your beauty sleep.’

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‘Thanks for your concern, but my beauty won’t suffer too badly from a few extra hours of work. And, Wren?’

She cocked an eyebrow at me.

‘Don’t make me come after you. My patience won’t hold out for ever.’

One corner of her lips lifted and she all but vibrated with theBring it onshe didn’t utter.

I sighed under my breath. This game wasn’t over, regardless of my daring her into displaying her intelligence just now. I watched as she opened the door and threw me one last look over her shoulder.

‘Until next time, Jasper.’

I collapsed into my seat the moment she left, dragging my fingers through my hair as the rush of adrenaline drained from my body.

Maybe she had a point, damn it. Maybe the Mortimers should avoid the Binghamms at all costs. Because even this small taster of what I suspected she had in store for me would wreck my concentration for the rest of the day.

Of course it will. Because you’re just that weak, aren’t you? Are you going to shy away from another fight, give in that easily?Debateyour way through another fight with an opponent? Maybe you should change your name, then. Because that is certainly not the Mortimer way.

Arousal receded as my father's pitiless, unwanted voice echoed in my head. My jaw clenched as I fought a different kind of discomfort. But those disparaging words, branded into my soul from childhood, continued to echo through me, followed by bitterness for how long I'd let it rule every corner of my life.

But I'd done something about it...eventually. I'd taken control.

By letting Perry Bingham convince me to allow him to sign on to my deal? Knowing deep down it would probably piss my father off when I proved the generations-long feud meant nothing to me?

I shrugged the suggestion away. Regardless of the reason behind it, I was going to see this thing through. This project was my baby, the biggest deal I'd ever negotiated. I wasn't about to let it fall to pieces now.

Because Hugh Mortimer was still alive and well. Regardless of the fact that he'd removed himself from the immediate sphere of the clan, I knew he kept an eye on what happened within the company. And the last thing I was about to do was to prove him right. Even if I had to fight and wrestle Wren and her whole family under my control, I would bring this deal home.

Just to prove my father wrong about me.

Again.

CHAPTER FOUR

'WHATKINDOftime do you call this?' I growled at the woman who stood in my doorway, thankfully wearing more clothes than yesterday. That moment of gratitude was fleeting though. On account of her succeeding where I was sure she'd fail at annoying me even more.

She sashayed into my office, looking stunningly immaculate, despite the very late hour, tossed her stylish briefcase on the sofa and shrugged. 'I'm pretty sure I warned you.'

'Working late is one thing. Turning up for a meeting at almost midnight is just taking the piss. How did you get here, anyway?'

'I took a cab. Why, were you worried about my safety?' she asked, one hand braced on her lean, curvy hip as she stopped in front of my desk.

Damn it, yes, I'd been worried. And increasingly vexed about it. I'd succumbed and called her office an hour ago, only to be blocked by her security who rightly wouldn't give out details of their boss's whereabouts. Not knowing whether she was going to turn up or not had kept me rooted in my office, tackling work that could easily have waited till tomorrow with dwindling concentration.

I shook my head as I stalked over to my liquor cabinet, poured myself a stiff Scotch. I toyed with being inhospitable for a few seconds before fixing her the mineral water with lime I'd seen her drinking at her party.

I offered the drink, daring her with my eyes to refuse. She glanced at the glass, a hint of surprise lighting her eyes before, frowning, she accepted it.

'I reread the contract today. The break clause might be skewed in your favour, but you realise I can simply do nothing for six months and watch you crash and burn?'

I tensed at her opening salvo. 'You'd really do that and lose close to half a billion pounds in profits?'

She hesitated for the tiniest revealing moment. 'Yes.'

‘Are you sure? Don’t you want to run that by your board first?’

Her chin went up and she boldly met my gaze. ‘The board will stand behind any decision I make. Perry already had their backing to get out of this deal.’

Shit. That was news to me. ‘After going to all that trouble of begging me for the partnership?’

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Her lashes swept down and stayed down for a long time. ‘His reasons are none of your business. Same goes for mine.’

‘Wrong, sweetheart. They are exactly my business, since we’re effectively joined at the hip.’

She shook her head. ‘You left him no choice. Not after you bought out the previous company Perry was supposed to partner with.’

I frowned. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The Morocco deal. Isn’t it true you only intended to go with two hotels?’

‘That was the initial plan, yes. But—’

‘But then you got greedy and bought up four more adjoining sites? Just because you could?’

‘It wasn’t a matter of greed, it was a matter of good business. And yes, because I damned well could. I’m failing to see what your point is here, Wren.’

‘My point is, Perry came to you only after you became the new owner of the contract he was trying to secure. He didn’t want to, but he’d been working on that deal long before you came on board. He...he was forced to come to you.’

My fingers tightened around my glass. ‘Unless your family derives some macabre pleasure from hanging on to this shit even after twenty years, he could’ve walked

away. Why didn't he?'

Her gaze rose and I caught a shaft of pain in her eyes. 'Perry hates losing. And some wounds run deep.'

Frustration bit through me. 'What about you? I'm not asking for a family reunion or even a suggestion that we bury the hatchet. All I'm asking for is a business deal where we both stand to profit for a very long time.'

Her lips twisted. 'Money isn't everything.'

I snorted. 'Then what are you doing in that office half a mile away? Running a charity?'

'I meant money isn't everything, every time.'

'Maybe not. But is that a strong enough reason to risk everything? For God's sake, who I am shouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things.'

'To my family, it does.'

I approached her until we were a foot apart.

She stayed her ground and that defiant stance made me instantly hard. Surprise, surprise. I leaned forward until her alluring perfume tortured me mercilessly. Until my thoughts began to fracture under the weight of the need to pull her close. Kiss her. Vent my frustration on anywhere she'd let me touch.

Starting with the silky skin of her neck. I'd work my way down, ridding her of that pristine cream shirt, which clung to her body. My gaze dropped to her chest, saw the faintest outline of her nipples. Sweet heaven, what I'd give to suck on those succulent

nubs.

My eager mind strayed deeper into erotic realms.

I'd take off every single item of clothing except those red-soled heels, bend her over my desk and ram myself so deep inside her that we'd both see stars. Unlike last time, I had a condom nearby this time. Several, in fact. I'd taken to carrying the things with me wherever I went now. In case Wren Bingham happened to be there and begged me with her alluring mouth and eyes to service her as she had that night in the maze.

I leaned closer. She twitched and shuddered as my mouth brushed her earlobe. I wanted to catch the delicate flesh between my teeth, hear that control-destroying gasp she gave when she was caught in pleasure, but I restrained myself. Barely. 'Then they need to get over themselves, and fast. Because I'm not letting this one go. Now, shall we get on with this meeting? My casino isn't going to fit itself and, I promise, the longer you make me wait, the less reasonable I'll get about accommodating your behaviour.'

She froze, then jerked back a step. Whatever she read in my eyes made hers widen before it narrowed. 'This is your last chance, Jasper,' she said, her voice throbbing with an emotion I didn't want to examine.

'No.'

She stared at me for an age, then nodded. 'Fine. Let's discuss the casino.'

An hour later, I watched her walk out ahead of me—because I wasn't letting her catch a cab home at one o'clock in the morning, despite her protests—her sexy arse and endless legs an erotic sight that made my mouth water.

Just like last time, she'd come fully prepared. I had a set of approved timetables and

proposed delivery of top-of-the-line gaming equipment in my briefcase, ready to green light in the morning.

I was buzzing with quiet excitement at her sheer proficiency while she'd grown increasingly despondent as the meeting had progressed. It was clear she wasn't happy about my insistence on our partnership continuing.

She reached the lift and shot me a look filled with venom. And despite a low warning hum at the back of my head suggesting that it wasn't too late to ditch Bingham's, I found myself smiling as I stepped into the lift with her.

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I wasn't smiling two weeks later when I slammed my phone down after another failed call to the number that had risen to the top of my speed-dial list.

She didn't answer.

It was time to pull out the big guns.

I typed out a quick text.

I'm calling you in one minute. I suggest you pick up or the next call will be from my lawyers. Trust me, you don't want that.

The speech bubble that said she was answering rippled for several seconds—while I held my stupid breath—before it died. Exactly one minute later, I dialled her number.

'Hello?'

'What the fuck do you think you're doing, Wren?'

'Good afternoon to you, too, Jasper. How's your day going?'

'You know damn well how it's going. You went behind my back and cancelled our meeting with the advertising team. Yesterday you didn't bother to show up for the VIP guest hospitality meeting. The day before that—'

'If you're going to list everything I've done or not done in the last two weeks, do you mind if I pour myself a drink? I have a feeling I'll be thirsty by the time you're

finished.'

'This is absurd. You're costing us both a lot of money.'

'Nothing earth-shattering I can't recoup eventually.'

'At the risk of sounding egotistical, I can withstand the losses way longer than you can. Have you thought about that?'

She hesitated for a split second. 'Maybe. But just as you've done your research on me, I've done mine on you. You have a board to answer to. And I dare say not everyone is thrilled about you hanging on to this deal when cutting me loose makes better sense. What do you tell them when they ask, Jasper? That you're holding on, on the off chance you'll get to fuck me as part of the deal?'

My stomach muscles knotted. I wasn't going to deny it. But it wasn't myentirereason. 'They trust my judgement, which is more than I'm guessing you can say for your own board.'

'Clearly you don't know as much as you think you do.'

'Enlighten me, then.'

'For starters? My board approved the list of willing partners who have indicated they'd be happy to buy out Bingham Industries' interest in this deal and they know you're refusing to entertain that idea on the basis that you're being a pig-headed—'

'Watch it, Wren. I won't be spoken to like that.'

To her credit, she didn't offer a scathing comeback.

‘Has it occurred to you that prolonging this battle leaves you progressively exposed, not to mention in danger of ruining your personal reputation?’ I asked.

‘What are you talking about?’ she replied, her voice tight.

‘It’s no secret that Bingham’s is facing financial issues. Have you wondered why the corporate sharks haven’t started circling yet?’

‘Because we’re not as weak as you think.’

‘Bullshit. It’s because of your association with the Mortimer Group. For now anyone with a lick of corporate sense knows not to mess with you because you’ve partnered with me. That protection erodes the second you give the impression we’re not on the same page on this.’

‘It’s not an impression.’

I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled loudly. ‘Christ, Wren, you’re an intelligent woman. Don’t let emotion cloud your judgement. I’m reaching the point where I won’t feel inclined to keep the wolves from storming your door.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ she said sharply.

‘Frankly, I’d rather have you begging for something else. But more on that in a while. For now, I want you to think hard about what you’re doing.’

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‘I may be wrong, but I swear you just called yourself my saviour.’

‘Take the advice or don’t. And just so we’re clear, the meeting has been rescheduled for tomorrow morning. If you’re not in my office at eight a.m., I’ll start playing dirty, too.’

I hung up before I lost it. Or let that sexy voice of hers wreak even more havoc on my self-control.

For the third time, I picked up the phone, this time to my assistant. ‘Trish, reschedule the meeting with the advertising team for eight a.m. tomorrow and tell them Miss Bingham will attend. Then send her an email to say I want the boutique contracts I sent her last week reviewed and couriered over by close of business today.’

‘Right away, Mr Mortimer.’

I replaced the handset and sat back, the throb of anticipation firing higher.

At five past five it’d turned to irritation. By five-thirty, I was pacing my office, my jaw locked in burning annoyance.

Striding to my desk, I hit the number for my assistant. ‘Anything?’

‘No, sir.’

‘The courier is still there?’

‘Yes, sir, he’s still waiting at the Bingham Industries reception. Should I tell him to leave?’

‘No. He stays there until I say otherwise.’

‘Okay. Um... Mr Mortimer?’

I paused. ‘Yes?’

‘Don’t forget you have the Art Foundation’s Annual Gala at seven-thirty.’

I smothered a curse. I’d forgotten about my next social obligation while indulging in games with Wren. Thankfully, I’d prepared my speech weeks ago. ‘Thanks for the reminder.’

‘You’re welcome. I’ve sent your new tux up to the penthouse and arranged for the car to be downstairs at seven.’

About to hang up, I tossed in one last question. ‘How many more to go until gala season is over?’ I asked, praying she’d say this was the last one.

‘Another two, and your cousin Graciela sent an email today about the next Mortimer Quarterly launch party.’

‘Thanks.’

After hanging up, I took several deep breaths. I was in danger of letting Wren unbalance me. As patron of several art foundations, I had a duty to attend this event. That it’d slipped my mind so completely made me grimace. The grimace intensified when I realised I’d been all set to track Wren down wherever she’d disappeared to instead of tackling the other time-sensitive deals I had piled up on my desk.

She was becoming an obsession.

Becoming?

I smothered the mocking inner voice and resisted the urge to call Trish again and find out whether the contract was on its way back to me. Instead I picked up a random file.

The knock on the door interrupted my focus an hour later. My pulse leapt but it was only Trish poking her head through the door. 'It's six-thirty, sir. And before you ask, no, the courier is still at Bingham's.'

My lips flattened. 'Tell him to leave. I'll deal with Miss Bingham myself.'

Several ways of dealing with her reeled through my head, all of which were most definitely NSFW.

Three hours later, the speeches were done, I'd handed over a very fat cheque and worked the room twice to ensure all present and future donors were appropriately satisfied with my attention.

Then I called the number I'd been hoping not to use any time soon. It was answered on the first ring. 'I need an address,' I said.

'Of course, sir,' my head of security answered.

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Twenty minutes later, I leaned on the doorbell of the ground-floor maisonette in Fulham. Enough lights blazed within to make me comfortable she was home. Still, she kept me cooling my heels for a couple of minutes, during which time I wondered whether she was alone. What I'd interrupted.

'Who is it?' she said, her sexy voice coming through the solid wood.

'You know who it is. I just saw you looking through the security glass. At least you're not reckless about your safety.'

'It's almost midnight, Jasper,' she replied after a short pause.

The possibility that I'd caught her off guard pleased me. Which went to show how pathetic I was in gaining this tiny upper hand. 'Isn't that your favourite time of day to talk business? I'm merely obliging you. Open the door, Wren.'

'What could we possibly have to discuss that can't wait?'

Her sheer gumption drew an incredulous laugh from me. I dragged my fingers through my hair. 'I'm going to throw some names at you. Let me know if you're interested in discussing them. Palmer Jones Plc. Winlake Hotel. Morpheus Tech—'

She yanked the door open, her eyes wide with alarm. 'What did you do?'

'Do I have your attention now?'

Her jaw clenched and alarm morphed into a scowl.

‘Invite me in, Wren,’ I suggested softly.

Her fingers tightened on the door for a few stubborn seconds before she nudged it open.

I entered, walking down polished floorboards and Venetian wallpapered walls into a large sitting room decorated in white with splashes of warm, earthy colours. Exotic artwork featured majorly and I fought the urge to ask about her taste in art. This wasn’t a social call.

‘I said what did you do?’ she repeated.

I turned to face her, noting for the first time what she was wearing. Her black satin, lace-edged top—clearly a nightie set designed to drive men insane—clung to her full breasts. The shorts skimmed her upper thighs, and even in the lamplight I saw enough bare skin to ramp my arousal through the roof. I dragged my gaze up past her face to the hair piled haphazardly atop her head. So far, I’d only seen it down, but she looked even more delectable in that slightly dishevelled, ready-for-bed state.

I tried to reel myself in. What the hell did she just ask me? Oh, yeah... ‘So far? Nothing. But I know they’re three of your top five clients.’

Her green eyes snapped with fire. ‘So what? You’ve proved you have a spy in my office. Bravo, Jasper. And what exactly are you accusing me of? I sent your boutique contracts back an hour ago. Did you check your email before you came storming over here?’

‘Yes, I did. And while I’ll forgive the odd typo or two, which wasn’t in my version, what the hell do you think you’re playing at, allowing your sub-contractors the option to trigger an extended delivery clause?’

She shrugged. 'What can I say? I'm a generous boss. And that option was in exceptional circumstances only.'

'Which every single one of them will take advantage of! Here's a free tip, since you haven't been CEO for long—soft-balling your contracts like that is a sure-fire route to driving Bingham's out of business. Hell, even Perry knew that.' I mentally kicked myself the moment her brother's name fell from my lips.

She sucked in a quick breath and her lips flattened. 'Don't you dare say his name.'

I exhaled slowly. 'I'm done fucking around with you, Wren. This nonsense stops now or, come tomorrow morning, I'm going after your top five clients. You don't need me to tell you that I have enough personal resources to scupper every deal of yours, or, at the very least, stall it as much as you're trying to stall mine.'

Her fists balled. 'Get the hell out of my flat, Jasper.' The words were low but pithy, her eyes burning with anger and pain.

'I will, as soon as you give me your word that these shenanigans are over.'

Her chin went up. 'Agree to a five-year deal instead of three and I'll think about it.'

I considered it for half a second. 'No. As much as you won't like to hear it, it's for your own good as much as mine.'

'How utterly condescending of you,' she tossed back at me.

I didn't realise I'd been walking towards her until I caught the scent of her shampoo. Until I saw the tiny gold flecks in her eyes reflecting the lamplight. Her head was tilted up and I couldn't help visually devouring the creamy smoothness of her skin.

‘I may not deem it good business sense to renegotiate now but I won’t deny you the option of doing so at a later date.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Please, stop trying to wrangle yourself into those sheep’s clothes when we both know you and your family are wolves.’

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Dear God, but she tested me. ‘You know something? I regret not giving you that spanking you begged me for that day in the maze.’

She sucked in a quick, betraying breath. I enjoyed watching her nonplussed expression before her features closed. ‘Your memory must be faulty. I never begged you for anything.’

‘Not with your mouth. But we both know what you wanted that day.’

Her nostrils fluttered delicately, her eyes growing that shade of moss green that betrayed her. ‘You have a vivid, and very flawed, imagination, Jasper.’

‘I agree with the vivid part. I’m very happy to demonstrate just how flawed you think my memory is. Right now if you want.’ I gestured at the wide sofa behind her and for the tiniest moment heat flared in her eyes.

‘I don’t want, thank you. Not that. Not any of this.’ There was a desperate note in her voice. ‘When are you going to accept it and end this?’

End our association? Watch her retreat behind that glass building half a mile away from my office that might as well have been a continent away for all the access I’d have to her? Not if I could bloody well help it. ‘You know the terms of the deal as well as I do. So far I have zero incentive to give you what you want. Until such time as that changes...’ I shrugged ‘... I want you to accept that and work with me.’

‘I won’t. And you’ll be wise not to push me.’

‘Or what?’ I challenged.

‘Remember those accolades you generously listed for the benefit of your Moroccan team? It’s only a matter of time before I succeed.’

And as absurd as the feeling was, a part of me relished that fight with her. Glancing down at her, I drawled, ‘It turns you on to fight with me, doesn’t it?’

She snorted. ‘Now you’re just being plain ridiculous.’ But her words lacked the punch of conviction.

‘Am I?’ I murmured. ‘Then why are your nipples hard? Why’s your skin flushed? I bet you’d be too proud to admit you’re hot and wet right now.’

Her nostrils flared. ‘Haven’t you learned the futility in attempting reverse psychology with me by now?’

I smiled, enjoying myself for the first time today. ‘I don’t hear a denial, sweetheart.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ she admonished. ‘I’m not your sweet anything.’

‘You’re right. You’re like a stiff shot of Scotch whisky, raging and burning all the way down. Problem is, one taste just triggers a need for another. And another...’

She stiffened. ‘I wouldn’t know. I don’t drink.’

The tastelessness of my analogy hit home a second too late. ‘Hell. I’m sorry. That wasn’t meant—’

‘You’re still here, Jasper. Why?’

‘Because your nipples are still hard. You’re breathless and I know it’s not because you’re offended. Or annoyed with me. You want another taste, too, don’t you, Wren?’

She opened her mouth, but I placed a finger on her lips. ‘You can take the high road if you want, but I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m dying to kiss you. Can I?’

One perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched, and, God, even that was beyond sexy. ‘You didn’t bother to ask last time. Why ask now?’

‘Last time was...different. Yet you did invite me to do my worst, as you put it. You needed me to take control. You wanted the fastest route out of your head and I provided it.’

She continued to glare at me. ‘You think this makes you some kind of noble knight or something?’

I shrugged. ‘Or something. So can I kiss you, Wren? Or do you want me to take the decision out of your hands again, give you the chance to tell me off later and claim it was all a mistake?’

The faintest flush of guilt stained her cheeks. ‘You think you know me?’

‘Not well enough. Not as much as I’d like. But we’ll get around to that soon enough. For now...’ I inched closer until mere millimetres separated our lips, until her sweet breath washed over my top lip. Until I craved her so badly it was a physical pain not to just let the lust lashing us take over. But she was right. I wanted her to see me in a better light. Wanted her to want me without the speed bumps of our corporate skirmishes in the way.

Just when I started to give up hope, her beautiful eyes locked on mine. Still

challenging. Still vexed. But also aroused. Interested. Hell, even craving.

Her gaze dropped to my mouth. And she swallowed hard. 'For now...you have one minute. Then I'm throwing you out.'

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The words were barely out of her mouth before I was on her, intent on not missing a single second. Memories of kissing and touching her in the maze had haunted me for weeks and finally I was reliving them. My fingers in her hair held her steady as I stroked her tongue with mine. Yeah, I was a little forceful, but, hell, she'd driven me steadily insane and I wasn't in the mood to play gentleman.

She squirmed, fighting an internal battle, then, with an impatient moan, she gripped my shoulders. She rose on tiptoe, her movements increasingly demanding as she pressed her body against mine and opened wider for me.

Yes! I grabbed one hip, pressed her against me as I walked us back towards her sofa. Seconds later, she was on her back and I was on top of her, devouring her for all I was worth.

Sweet Jesus, she tasted even more sublime. Just as brazen with her needs as in the maze, she spread her thighs, accommodating me as I palmed one breast and toyed with her nipple. Her hips undulating, seeking the iron rod of my cock. We met, strained and groaned at the exquisite intensity of it. In slow, torturous rhythm, we writhed against one another, while the kiss turned hotter, wetter, simulating everything I wanted to do to her, and vice versa.

But through it all, I was keenly aware of the seconds ticking down, aware she could kick me out at any moment.

So I chose to play dirty.

On the next roll of her hips, I pressed hard against her, holding my cock tight against

her satin-covered pussy, urging her to feel what I could do for her. What we could do to each other.

I bit back a smile when an involuntary spasm shuddered through her body. 'Let's renegotiate,' I rasped against her lips. 'One minute isn't going to cut it.'

She laughed a little unkindly, even while her fingers dug painfully into my biceps to hold me in place. Why did I love that she wasn't afraid to show me her fire? 'Poor Jasper.'

I growled. 'Give me ten minutes.' It was nowhere near enough for what I craved to do but it was a starting point.

She raised her head a fraction and bit my lower lip, making me shudder. 'No.'

'Christ, Wren. You're a ballbreaker, you know that?'

She stiffened slightly but didn't pull back. 'Five,' she countered after another round of furious kissing.

I yanked down one strap of her nightie top as she eagerly unbuttoned my shirt. Her fingers delved down to caress my chest and abs as I swooped onto one eager nipple. She hissed her appreciation and I feasted, groaning at her silken skin, the mouth-watering taste of her. Her back arched, offering more of herself.

'God, you're beautiful,' I rasped. 'Maddening but breathtaking.'

Against my temple, I felt her faint smile as she raked demanding fingers through my hair. Then, taking my head between her hands, she redirected me to her neglected breast. I teased, tortured and suckled until she was a glorious rose-pink. Only then did I trail one hand down, beneath the elastic of her shorts.

The brazen discovery nearly blew my head clean off. ‘You answer your front door not wearing panties, sweetheart?’

‘My home, my rules.’

I smiled, deciding to enjoy this particular gift before it was taken away. Spearing her with my gaze, I slid my hand lower, down over that silken strip of hair until I encountered hot, slippery flesh.

‘God,’ I muttered, a red haze passing over my vision. ‘You’re so wet.’

Expecting a smart retort, I watched as she sucked in a slow breath, her eyes not leaving mine as she chased my touch. ‘Yes, I am. And your five minutes are almost up,’ she said a little unsteadily.

‘I’m aware, sweetheart.’ I pressed my middle finger inside her and her hips jerked, her inner muscles clinging as she whimpered. ‘Thing is, do I use that time for you or shall I be selfish and use it all for me?’

Her eyes widened a touch but she remained still, her hands gripping me tight. I was sure she wasn’t aware of how her nails dug into me, and I bit back another smile.

Who the hell was I bluffing? I was going to use this for her. When I got around to fucking Wren, I intended to be inside her longer than whatever seconds I had left in this ridiculous game.

Bending low, I flicked my tongue over one ripe nipple as I speared her with my fingers. Her head started to roll, those insane sounds erupting from her throat again. I squeezed my eyes shut to regain some control.

But soon, much too soon, I was at that point of ravening lust, where my mind

threatened to cease to function. She did this to me. Every single time. Even before we'd ever had a proper conversation, she'd pulled at me on some level. First with her brilliant mind and now, with her glorious body. The way it softened and moulded beneath my hands, the way she fought the groan tearing through her before finally letting it free to vibrate its feminine power through her body. The way those hips rolled so perfectly into mine.

Every. Single. Time.

But...hold on a sec. How long was I going to keep buckling? Sure, I might have started this, hell, begged for this, but she'd ended up dictating the terms anyway.

Because you're weak...

I gritted my teeth against Hugh Mortimer's damning words. Against the growing din of the clock counting down while I was getting lost in my own head. Against the even dirtier game I suspected I had to play if I was going to win this thing. Win her around.

Slowly, I raised my head. ‘Wren.’

She ignored me, nibbling on my jaw before sinking her white teeth into my throat. I jerked back before I lost complete control.

‘Wren. Stop.’

CHAPTER FIVE

I’VEALWAYSHATEDmy name, ever since Perry let slip when I was nine that my father had given it to me as a cruel joke. George Bingham had possessed a rather dark sense of humour. Humour he’d often directed towards me in the rare times I was allowed in his vicinity.

He’d chosen a name with no softness to it, apparently, because he didn’t want a soft child. Particularly, he hadn’t wanted a daughter. So in his bitter humour and disappointment, he’d named me Wren. Nondescript. Forgettable. All hard angles and far too close towrenchfor my liking. At school I’d been teased about it.Wren the Wraithbecause of my thinness, my paleness and my height. Coupled with the oppressive cloaks we’d been required to wear at my equally oppressive Hampshire boarding school, the name had fitted all too well.

But now, hearing it groaned from the depths of Jasper’s arousal, it sounded...different. Not ordinary. Definitely lusty. Erotic and potent. A name uttered as if he couldn’t help himself. As if he had to say it...or die.

Even as I dismissed my thoughts as a stupid flight of fancy, I leaned into him, silently

pleading for him to groan it again, to fan the flames of my own arousal to that mindless place he'd taken me that chilly evening in my family's maze.

No, not back to that place.

I wanted a new place. One I could claim wholly for myself, without the spectre of my judgemental family looming over me.

As much as I hadn't wanted to let him into my personal space, now that I had him here, it wasn't so bad. My sofa would be a good starting point. Maybe eventually my bed...if we could drag ourselves there—

Except...he was already pulling away.

Far too quickly, painful reality rushed back in. Dear God, I was literally cavorting with the enemy. And even worse, he was about to leave me hanging moments away from another mind-shambling orgasm. Dazed and more than a little confused, I glanced down at myself, sprawled out with my breasts on display and my shorts pulled up tight enough to frame my crotch, highlighting the need coursing through me.

Somehow my fingers were caught in his and even though he'd rejected me, he still held on to me. Which made my exposed state even more humiliating.

I yanked myself out of his hold, face flaming as I pulled up the straps of my top until my shamefully erect nipples were covered. Jasper was still wedged between my thighs and despite his withdrawal, the outline of his erection pressed behind his fly. The sight of it reminded me of what I'd been grinding up against moments ago. His glorious thickness, the very masculine way he rolled his hips. The promise of how he would feel deep inside me...

Hunger and frustration threatened to overshadow my humiliation. But the very thought that I was considering, even for a millisecond, talking him into finishing what he'd started forced me to locate my elusive outrage.

'Can you get off me, please?'

His lips firmed. 'Wren, we need to—'

'Now, please,' I interjected, infusing my voice with necessary ice.

For several seconds, his hazel eyes narrowed, eyes that seemed to see beneath my skin, examining me intently before, thankfully, he rose from the sofa.

He crossed to the window and stared out onto the street. Whether to give me time to compose myself or because he needed a minute himself, I didn't question as I jumped up. I yanked my passion-tousled hair out of the band securing it, letting the strands fall around my shoulders and partly obscure my face in the vain hope of a shield. I contemplated going to retrieve my dressing gown out of my room and decided against the revealing move. The last thing I wanted was to lose further ground to Jasper Mortimer.

I sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he turned to face me. His stark hunger was throttled back and the eyes that stared at me held only iron resolution.

'Believe it or not, that wasn't how I wanted this to go,' he rasped.

Something fairly substantial lurched with disappointment inside me. 'And by this you mean what exactly? Storming into my flat or that half-baked seduction on my sofa?'

For some reason, my snippiness amused him. I hated myself a little for liking his smile. 'I didn't storm in and I may have stopped short of the full five minutes but

there was nothing half-baked about it, sweetheart.'

Again, something lurched. It was the sweetheart I'd outwardly objected to but secretly didn't...hate. While I wasn't about to examine why, I knew it had something to do with the lack of softness and warmth in my life, both in childhood and now. And yes, I feared for my own gullibility at being taken in by a common term of endearment.

I crossed my arms over my chest, stingingly aware my erogenous zones were still on fire and one particular area was announcing it to the world.

'Whatever. You're going to use those extra minutes to leave, aren't you?' I said, striving for boredom.

This time his whole face hardened. 'Not until we've cleared up a few important things.'

'And what would those be?'

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‘You’ll find out in the morning. In the meantime, fix the contract. Bring it with you tomorrow.’

I chose a silent glare as my answer.

He crossed the room to where I stood, gazed down at me long and contemplatively enough to make me tense against the urge to fidget.

‘We both know you’re better than this, Wren,’ he murmured. ‘There’s absolutely no shame in proving me right. And who knows? You might get a nice surprise when you turn up tomorrow.’

When...notif. His confidence would’ve been insulting had I not spent the last two weeks and most of today confirming what I knew in my gut but hadn’t been ready to admit.

I held my breath as he raised his hand, trailed his finger from my jaw to the lower lip that still tingled with the need to repeat that kiss. His eyes burned hot and heavy into mine for another moment before, gritting his teeth, he walked out of my living room.

A moment later, I heard the door close behind him. A breath shuddered out of me. I didn’t exactly call it relief because that knot of hunger was still lodged in my belly, intent on reminding me how long it’d been since I’d had good sex. Or any kind of sex, for that matter.

It was only when I realised I was listening out for the sounds of his car leaving my quiet street that I sank onto the sofa. Head buried in my hands, I tried to breathe

through confusion and need. Through all the reasons I'd allowed Jasper into my personal sanctuary. I wasn't melodramatic enough to fear that I'd never sit on my sofa without imagining him there wreaking sweet havoc on my body, but I suspected the experience wouldn't be easily dismissed.

Growling with impatience and frustration, I jumped up again, resolutely keeping my gaze averted from the wide expanse of the sofa as I left the room. Half an hour later, I conceded that I wouldn't get to sleep without expelling the sexual energy coursing through my blood.

As I reached for my vibrator, I cursed Jasper Mortimer loudly and succinctly. Then ruthlessly used his image to find a quick, semi-satisfactory but thankfully mind-numbing release.

I stepped out of the cab and paused on the pavement, tilting my head up to stare at the majesty that was Mortimer Towers. During my previous visits I'd used the barrier of righteous indignation to ignore its grandeur and, while I couldn't predict what would happen in the next hour, I instinctively felt today was...different. That it wouldn't be so bad to admit the masterpiece building that had won a clutch of accolades was worthy of them.

Or perhaps it was because I'd accepted on some level that the man I was dealing with was a lot more powerful than I'd given him credit for, and that power could irreversibly impact Bingham's.

Certainly, my visit to my company's archive department yesterday had uncovered the worst of my fears. Perry had been playing fast and loose with several contracts and had 'misplaced' important documents that could have severe repercussions on our business relationships.

That shocking discovery was the reason I'd buried myself in the basement of

Bingham's till late last night. I was still staggered by how much Perry had been allowed to get away with by the board.

But truly, when it came right down to it, I wasn't surprised. The board was made up of the extended Bingham relatives and cronies who'd trusted Perry simply because he was male, and a Bingham. There'd been little to zero oversight and no one had dared to question his way of doing business. Just as long as he'd managed to keep the company just above the red and they collected their fat bonuses come Christmas.

Which reminded me...no Christmas bonuses this year.

I sucked in a deep breath, lowering my gaze to the glass doors that led into Jasper's domain. After a restless night that my vibrator had done very little to cure, I'd given up on sleep at five o'clock. The boutique contract was fixed and an email sent to the subcontractors apologising and withdrawing the clause I'd inserted in the last-chance hope that it would frustrate Jasper into releasing me from the contract.

We both know you're better than this...

Perhaps more than anything else that had happened in my flat last night, those words had made the most impact. Because Jasper was right.

Despite my attempts to aggravate him into dropping this deal, a significant part of me had cringed at the depths I was sinking to; the mockery I was making of my own hard-won achievements.

I hadn't quite decided what the new course of action in fighting him would be but I most certainly wasn't going to lie down and let him walk all over me.

Heat caressed my neck and flowed up into my face at the sexual connotation of my thoughts. I'd been more than prepared for him to do exactly that on my sofa last

night. Firming my lips, I attempted to push the memory out of my head as I strode towards the lift.

His receptionist greeted me when I stepped out on his floor.

‘Good morning, Miss Bingham. Mr Mortimer is waiting for you in conference room six. He says you’re to go straight through.’

I told myself my escalating heartbeat was because I was irritated that he’d assumed I would turn up this morning. Not because I wanted to see him again. Not because the smell of his aftershave on my skin and the rasp of his stubble burn on my inner thighs had made me groan into my pillow more than once last night.

And most definitely not because he knew that two of the three company names he’d thrown at me last night were threatening to pull out of their deals with us.

Struggling to empty my mind of the challenges that awaited me back at Bingham Industries, I took a few calming breaths. I’d need optimal mental dexterity to survive this meeting with Jasper.

Running a hand over my stylish skirt suit, I strode down the wide hallway, pinning a cool, professional smile on my face as I passed his executives. I was absolutely not going to wonder how many of them had seen my trench-coat-and-promiscuous-heels performance. I’d been forced into a corner, and doing something was better than doing nothing and letting Jasper win.

What if it was all for nothing?

I mentally shrugged, gritting my teeth when I noticed that conference room six was the last one down a long hallway. Had Jasper orchestrated this walk of shame so his employees would see me? Was he that petty?

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A flash of anger whipped through me, threatening to wipe away my smile. I fought to keep it in place as I pushed the door open.

He stood at a long cabinet that bordered the far wall, helping himself to a cup of the same java blend his secretary had offered me that first visit. As I breathed in that mouth-watering hit of caffeine and watched the ripple of broad shoulder muscles encased in another immaculate suit, I wondered whether I would associate this particular brand of coffee with him for ever.

He turned just then, a small smile playing around his lips as his gaze tracked me from head to toe and back again. As he noted my attire his smile widened, what looked dangerously like triumph gleaming in his eyes.

I forced my gaze away, partly because I didn't want to confirm it and partly because in the morning light, with the sun streaming in, he looked far too delicious for my sanity. Reminded me far too vividly of how thoroughly I'd explored his body last night.

How I craved more?

'Can I get you anything? Coffee? I've had breakfast laid out for us if you're hungry.'

I shook my head. 'I'll take the coffee, but I don't want any breakfast. I've already eaten.' He didn't need to know it had only been a couple of bites of toast, hurriedly wolfed down because I'd got caught up in another woefully mismanaged Bingham file and almost missed leaving on time to get here for his eight o'clock deadline.

He nodded and poured a second cup, then added a dash of cream. When he reached me, he stared at me for a handful of seconds before holding out the cup. ‘Good morning, Wren. You ready to begin?’

His voice was a low rumble that travelled through me, reminding me how his lips had felt trailing the sensitive skin of my neck. The sweet abrasion of his stubble against my breast. The filthy decadence of his tongue capturing and swirling around my nipple.

I accepted the cup without answering. Saying yes would be deemed surrender and I couldn’t give in, not until I’d exhausted every avenue. Because while I could rightly claim that Perry had been the one to agree to this deal, it wouldn’t stop another confrontation with my board, another round of questioning my decision and intentions. Another call from my mother under the guise of checking in on me but really to lament about the path I was taking.

Shaking my head, I approached where the papers were laid out.

‘Wren?’

Refocusing on him as he joined me, I glanced at him. His expression was just as resolute as last night, but his eyes held the gentleness that conveyed understanding of my predicament. My guts tightened against the need to sink into that gentle look. It was the opposite of what I needed.

I set down my briefcase and coffee and pulled out a chair. ‘I have a long day ahead. Shall we get on with it?’ I said crisply.

His gentle expression evaporated, and his face hardened but he joined me at the table, pulling out the chair for himself before settling into it.

‘I checked with the subcontractors this morning. Looks like this morning you withdrew your magnanimous offers?’

I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of admitting my impetuous mistake. ‘Is that a question?’

He smiled. ‘Just an observation. And an offer of thanks for one less pain in my arse.’

I’d gripped that taut arse last night. Heat tunnelled through me and I moved my gaze to the papers in front of me. ‘Sure. Shall we move on to the next item on the agenda?’

He nodded, then took a sip of coffee.

I tried not to let my gaze drop to his lips. I really did. But a mere eight hours ago those lips were devouring mine, and, as much as I hated to concede it, he was one hell of a kisser. Combined with the knowledge of how much sweet havoc he could wreak with those lips between my legs, surely I could forgive myself for five seconds of indulgence?

‘Do you need a minute, Wren?’ he asked, a thread of amusement in his voice.

My gaze shot up to meet his and he was smiling knowingly. Without breaking eye contact, he nudged the agenda sheet towards me. ‘I went to the trouble of printing it out in case you didn’t check your emails this morning. So we can be on the same page, as it were,’ he added with a definite smirk.

I picked up the paper and quickly scrutinised it. There were twelve items on the list, mostly spelling out in black and white the tasks I was supposed to perform. I already knew the hours I was supposed to devote to the project but one item in particular made me glance up sharply.

‘You expect me to go to dinner with you on Wednesday?’

He nodded briskly. ‘A tequila producer I’ve had my eye on for a while is in town this week. He has a new specialised brand coming out around the time we open the first hotel. I want you with me because technically this should have been your job but I’m hoping you’ll help me convince him to supply exclusively to us for at least three months before he rolls it out to the general market.’

I frowned. ‘I already had a supplier lined up for you.’

‘Did you?’

The tight edge to his question made me pause for a second before answering. ‘Yes, I did.’

‘That’s curious. Because I’m sure there’s an email in my inbox telling me we’d lost our potential liquor supplier due to non-communication with Bingham Industries.’

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The throb of shame was more powerful this time. I tried to hide it by taking a sip of my own coffee. Slightly more composed, I set the cup down. 'I've had lot on my plate, as you know. This project with you isn't the only thing occupying my time.'

He stared at me for another stretch of time before he nodded. 'I'm not too fussed about losing that supplier, to be honest. His product was great but not spectacular. This new one promises to be rather exceptional. That's why I don't want to lose it. So, you'll come with me on Wednesday, yes?' he pressed.

A business dinner with him to secure a supplier wasn't a complete concession. I'd been in this business long enough to know contractors came and went for any number of reasons. Even if Bingham Industries managed to pull out of the contract, I could at least help Jasper secure this small part of his project.

I shrugged. 'Sure, I can do dinner. What time do you want me?'

His eyes darkened. 'I'll pick you up at seven at your place,' he said, his voice deep and raspy.

It would've been far more professional to arrange to meet him at the restaurant. And yet, I found myself answering, 'Okay.'

His smile grew warmer, his gaze several degrees hotter as it dragged over my face to rest on my mouth. Time stretched taut and charged with far too much sexual intensity, before he stared down at the paper. 'What's next?'

We worked through the next few items, and with each one I reassured myself that

nothing was set in concrete. Sooner or later, once Jasper realised the futility of a Mortimer-Bingham deal, replacing me would be a simple matter of snapping his fingers.

And if he didn't?

I dismissed the question. Just as I attempted to suppress the quiet excitement that was building inside me as we went down the list.

My head snapped up as Jasper abruptly rose. 'More coffee?'

A small bolt of surprise went through me as I realised I'd finished mine. I nodded as he walked over to the buffet cabinet, glancing at me over his shoulder. 'Are you sure I can't get you anything?'

I was about to refuse, but my gaze went to the clock and I noticed we'd been working for an hour. As if on cue, my stomach rumbled. It wasn't enough to get his attention but I knew it would eventually if I carried on working without eating.

Setting my pen down, I rose, rounded the conference table and joined him. Trays of warm, mouth-watering pastries were set out next to platters of fruit, juice carafes and assorted condiments.

Jasper grabbed two plates and handed me one.

Our fingers brushed as I took it from him. He heard my sharp intake of breath and stilled, staring down at me.

For several, electrifying seconds, we stayed frozen.

Then, as if pulled by invisible strings, I swayed towards him. At the very last

moment, I caught myself, veering away towards the food.

Dear God, what is wrong with me?

He'd gone down on me in the maze and, somehow, I'd managed to work on and off with him for two weeks, but one little tumble on my sofa last night and my concentration was shot to hell?

A little bewildered, I randomly selected food while desperately attempting to downplay how badly Jasper affected me. How badly I wanted to lean into that strong column of his neck, breathe in the aftershave that had so tantalised me last night.

Of course he'd put the brakes on then, though. Which meant, like me, he probably didn't think it was a good idea—

My thoughts stumbled to a halt when he laughed. 'That's the spirit. I love a woman with a healthy appetite.'

I blinked, then glanced down at my plate. My very full, very heaped plate of food. I cringed, aware of the flush creeping up my cheeks.

Then his words registered. Who was the last woman with a good appetite who'd occupied his attention? Did he have a girlfriend? It suddenly struck me that we'd had two sexual encounters without knowing the basics about each other. An uneasy, wholly unwelcome sensation tightened my chest. Surely, he wouldn't do the things he'd done to me if was seeing another woman?

He's a Mortimer, isn't he?

The twisting sensation inside me intensified.

‘I guess you were pretty hungry, after all?’ Jasper continued.

I dragged my focus from his imaginary harem to the embarrassment of my heaped plate. ‘God, there’s enough to feed an army here. I don’t need all of this. Not really. I was just...’

Just wondering who else you were going down on when you weren’t turning me inside out with your tongue...

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As I shook my head free of the thought, he stepped closer. ‘Here, I’ll take a couple of those off your hands if you want.’

I watched, a little annoyed for being so easily distracted by him as he transferred a bagel and croissant from my plate to his. He left far more than I needed on my plate but somehow I didn’t protest as his free hand landed in the small of my back, scrambling my brain as he guided me back to the table. ‘Come on, let’s get back to it,’ he said.

In between watching him take healthy bites out of his food and attacking the next item on the agenda, I demolished several pastries, mentally promising myself another twenty minutes on the treadmill at my next gym session.

I didn’t object when he returned to the buffet table and brought back a bowl of fruit, only squirmed stealthily in my chair as I watched him toss a grape into his mouth.

God, what the hell was so fascinating about watching this man eat? Whatever it was, I couldn’t stop myself from watching him swallow, the movement of his Adam’s apple curiously erotic enough to shoot arrows of desire into my pelvis.

‘Are we done?’ I asked, more out of desperation than anything else.

‘More or less,’ he replied.

‘What else is there?’

For the longest time, he didn’t reply. When he reacted, it was to reach into the fruit

bowl and pluck out a ripe, juicy strawberry. Then he rolled his chair around the table, breaching the gap between us. 'There's something else I want to talk about.'

Something dark and decadent in his voice made my thighs tingle, my breath rush out in a lustful little pant. 'Oh?'

'I feel the need to apologise for the way I left things last night.'

The reminder reduced the tingles but didn't demolish them altogether. 'You came to deliver a message and I received it loud and clear.'

'I'm not talking about business, and you know it.'

'Do I?'

He leaned forward, held the fruit against my bottom lip then trailed it lazily from side to side. 'I left you hanging,' he murmured throatily. 'I'm not in the habit of doing that.'

Curiously compelled, I licked the fruit before answering, 'I'm a big girl, Jasper. I can take it.'

His nostrils flared in arousal. 'Not if you don't have to.'

I sucked in a breath, the scent of the strawberry and his aftershave a potent mix that rendered me strangely breathless. 'You don't owe me anything...'

'Okay. But you still owe me one minute, possibly two.' He pressed the fruit harder against my mouth. 'Open,' he instructed gruffly.

My lips parted and I took the fruit. His gaze dropped to my mouth as I held it

between my lips for a moment then bit into it. Sticky juice trickled down one corner of my mouth. His gaze latched on to it for one tight little second before, groaning, he lunged forward.

He devoured half of the fruit as he sealed his lips to mine.

As if a switch had been thrown, feverish electricity consumed us as we consumed each other. He rose, his urgent hands landing on my waist to yank my body into his. My hands flew up his broad shoulders, explored for mere seconds before spiking into his hair.

Jasper's tongue delved into my mouth, licking away the last of the juices before tangling with mine. Desire shot through me, lifted me onto my tiptoes as I strained against him. Wanting more.

My vibrator last night had come nowhere close to satisfying the need clamouring anew inside me. The thought that Jasper was equally ravenous for me thrilled my blood as he deepened the kiss.

The faint sound of a ringing phone momentarily reminded me of where we were, the possibility that someone could walk in on us at any moment.

With a monumental effort, I broke the kiss and laid my hand on his chest as I fought to catch my breath. 'Jasper, I...the door...'

Without letting go of me, he walked us a few steps to the middle of the conference table and snatched up a small remote. Aiming it at the door, he clicked a button and I heard the distinct sound of it locking.

Burnished eyes pinned me where I stood. 'No one will disturb or hear us now. The room's soundproofed.'

My breath shuddered out, my fingers tightening on his nape even as I questioned my sanity. 'Jasper...'

He dropped his lips to my jaw, trailing little erotic bites before he caught my earlobe between his teeth. 'I regret not making you come last night. I sure as hell regret missing the chance to be inside you, even if it was only for one minute.'

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My laugh emerged shakily. ‘You’re assuming I would’ve let you.’

Just like last night, his lips explored the pulse in my neck. Shivering in delight, I angled my head, granting him access.

‘My negotiating skills are exceptional, Wren. I’m sure we would’ve come to some agreement had I stayed. But no matter. I have a new proposition for you. One I’m sure will satisfy us both.’

My arsenal was depleted. I had very little to fight him with. But he didn’t need to know that.

‘What is this proposition?’ I asked, my insides dipping alarmingly at how much I wanted to know. How much I hoped it was something I could agree to.

Yeah, my head definitely needed examining.

He held on to me but eased his torso away from mine. ‘You’re brilliant and sexy. You’ve driven me insane thus far but I don’t think I’ve hidden the fact that I want you. Hell, at this point it goes beyond want.’ His eyes burned into mine as he inhaled slowly.

My throat dried at the raw, potent need in his voice. A tremble commenced inside my belly as he continued.

‘Don’t think I haven’t noticed you still haven’t given me a clear-cut answer as to whether you intend to work with me or not. But I have a way I think we can co-exist

for the immediate future. A way that might make working with me a little more bearable?’

I didn’t think there was any way forward that wouldn’t incite my family’s disapproval but I held back from mentioning it. Somehow, discussing family feuds in this moment felt...wrong. ‘I’m listening,’ I said.

He dropped his forehead to mine. ‘You know I’m dying to fuck you. And I know you’re not completely immune to reciprocating.’

I couldn’t deny it. ‘I think you got your answer last night.’

He gave a lopsided smile. ‘Even though you also invited me to leave several times?’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘You annoyed me. And I’m complicated.’

‘Well, maybe this is one thing we can agree on. I’m great at giving you orgasms, despite withholding one last night.’

A husky laugh left my throat. ‘Are you seriously tooting your own horn?’

He shrugged, an arrogant gesture that was so completely natural I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d been born with it. One hand trailed up from my waist to rest beneath my chin. His thumb rubbed my lower lip and I felt his erection jerk against my belly. Heat arrowed between my legs, making my core wet and needy as I waited for him to elaborate.

‘Okay, here’s the deal. For every six hours you devote to this deal, you get an orgasm.’

My mouth sagged open. ‘I...what?’

His head dropped and delivered a hard, quick kiss before drawing back. Hazel eyes stayed on mine, his easy manner belied by the fact that every word out of his mouth held fierce determination, a promise to deliver on what he was offering. 'I think it's a better way for us to relieve our frustrations, if you like. Why scream with anger when you can scream with pleasure?'

I refused to examine why I wasn't completely outraged, why, contrary to every scrap of common sense I possessed, I was held rapt and completely aroused by his proposition. 'Let me get this straight. You want to buy my cooperation with orgasms?'

That wicked little smile tilted one corner of his mouth again. 'I want us to make love, not war,' he offered.

I raised an eyebrow. 'Wow, are you sure you're not on some two-for-one deal on clichés?'

His fingers dug into my waist to pull me closer still, ensuring I felt his hard cock against my belly. I shuddered, unable to help but push back, revelling in the power and promise of him. I was racked with mounting need; my gaze darted to the shiny expanse of the conference table.

Jasper followed my gaze and laughed. 'We can christen our new agreement right there, if you want, sweetheart.'

I swallowed, unable to believe that I was contemplating this absurdity. The excuse was that I'd arrived here with very little option but to continue to work with Jasper for the time being. Loyalty to my family dictated that the prize of working with the Mortimer Group was forbidden to me as a personal career choice, but while I was contract-bound to work with him, was it wrong to help myself to the cherry on top when he was freely offering it?

Between the mess Perry had left the company in and pressure from my mother, I didn't plan on dating anyone soon. Jasper's proposition ensured that we could work relatively friction-free, while enjoying a side benefit we both wanted.

The promise of sex lit a fuse in my blood. Before I got completely carried away with it, the question that'd niggled at me for the last hour rose again. 'Is this suggestion of yours inconveniencing anyone else?'

His brow knotted. 'What?'

'Are you dating anyone, Jasper?'

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His frown cleared but his eyes remained mildly accusing. 'I'm not sure how to interpret you believing I would give you orgasms while seeing another woman.'

I tried to stop the wild relief flowing through me. 'Is that a no, you're not seeing anyone else?'

'It's a no,' he confirmed with gritted teeth. 'You may not have a very high opinion of me, but I do have some standards, sweetheart.'

His censure shamed me a little, but I brushed it away.

'I'm waiting for an answer, Wren. You want me, I want you. Are we going to do this, or not?' he pressed.

He was still doing that thing with his hips that drove me insane. Just as it had last night. That knot of need I thought I'd dampened with my vibrator came roaring back, stronger than before. The thought of walking out of here nursing that ache suddenly became unthinkable. Unbearable.

Keeping my gaze on his, I reached between us and unbuttoned my jacket. Slowly, I shrugged out of it, then tossed it on the nearest chair.

Jasper followed the action with eyes ablaze.

Next, I reached for his tie, loosening it before snapping it free of his collar. He swallowed, and I smiled.

Leaning forward and trailing my lips up to his throat, I whispered in his ear, ‘I accept your proposal, Jasper. And I’d very much like to christen your conference table. Now, please.’

He hoisted me up as if I weighed nothing, and between one frenzied heartbeat and the next I was laid out flat on his conference table and he was staring down at me with eyes that promised mind-altering passion.

CHAPTER SIX

I’DCHOSENMYattire specially today because I’d needed the confidence boost; and because I’d accepted that the way I’d been handling things the past two weeks needed to change.

And perhaps—okay, extremely possibly—I’d also chosen my underwear because, deep down in a place I didn’t want to examine too closely, I’d hopedthiswould happen.

Between frenzied kisses and the need to explore every inch of his sleekly muscled body, I wasn’t certain which one of us undid my silk blouse. But I was certain which one stopped in their tracks, mouth hanging open at the sight of the sea-green lace bra I wore beneath it.

I hid a pleased smile as Jasper growled beneath his breath, his eyes rapt on my chest.

My lingerie was the indecently expensive kind, concocted of gossamer-thin scraps of lace, strings and silk, bought on a slightly tipsy whim while late-night online shopping, then shoved deep into the underwear drawer with much chagrin after the hangover wore off and the package arrived on my doorstep.

But in this moment, I patted myself on the back as Jasper’s hands hovered reverently

over my breasts, as if he wasn't sure whether to worship me or devour me.

'Jesus Christ, Wren. You're exquisite,' he breathed, his eyes darting from my chest to my face and back again.

'Not too exquisite to touch, I hope?'

He started to reach for me, then paused. 'Tell me you weren't wearing this underneath that damned trench coat when you came into my building two weeks ago?'

'Why would I want to stop torturing you by satisfying your curiosity?'

He raised an eyebrow, even while his frantic gaze dropped to latch onto my peaking nipples. 'Because we just agreed to call a truce?'

Trailing my finger down over the firm, tanned skin covering his clavicle, I decided to give a little. 'I wasn't wearing this exact same set, no. Now, are you going to unwrap me or make me wait?' I demanded softly.

With effortless ease, he divested me of my blouse. It landed on the floor, but I didn't care. Because my busy fingers had done some unwrapping of their own, exposing the most perfect set of abs I'd seen outside a magazine. I touched his skin, almost moaned at how warm and firm and utterly delicious he was. About to put my mouth where my hands had been, I whimpered in protest as Jasper pushed me back firmly.

Reading his intent, I relaxed, reclining on the table as he stepped back, took me in, then groaned. 'I'll never be able to take a meeting in this room without picturing you like this.'

'You'll get through it somehow, I'm sure.' I arched my back, the cool surface

momentarily chilling my skin; making my nipples harder. He saw the reaction and charged forward with another animalistic snarl.

‘I don’t like being the only one without a shirt on, Jasper.’

Cracking a taut smile, he jerked off his jacket and tossed it away. A crook of my finger and he was leaning over me. Strong hands framed my hips, trailed up my ribcage as I attacked his remaining shirt buttons. The moment I bared his chiselled torso, I dragged my fingernails over his taut, smooth skin.

‘Fuck, that feels good,’ he groaned, his gaze latching on to the lace doing a very poor job of hiding my arousal from him. ‘As much as I’m dying to get you naked, I don’t want to risk ripping anything off...this time. We both need to walk out of here with as many of our clothes intact as possible.’ He cupped my lace-clad breasts, squeezing with an urgency that telegraphed his need. ‘Help me out?’ he requested hoarsely.

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I wanted to tell him to rip it off, if only for the novelty of experiencing such raw passion for the first time in my life. But I bit my tongue. There were other ways to achieve the mindless state his eyes promised. Trailing my fingers back up his torso to his neck, I dropped my other hand to the first strap and slowly lowered it. 'Like this?'

His head jerked in a nod. 'More,' he commanded.

I tugged down the strap another fraction, bearing the top of my breast and exposing the smallest hint of a nipple.

'More, Wren. More. Show me those perfect breasts I tasted last night.'

'Hmm, how do I know you're not going to leave me hanging again?' I teased.

A dash of hectic colour highlighted his cheekbones. He nudged my hips to the edge of the table, until there was no mistaking his hard, potent ridge. 'I promise, this time I'm not stopping until every inch of my cock is buried inside you. Now, please take that damn bra off before I rip it off with my teeth.'

A shiver coursed through me, pooling heat between my thighs. I felt myself getting wetter and sucked in a deep breath to compose my erratic heartbeat. I was dying for him to take me, and, though I suspected this would be more memorable than my previous sexual encounters, I still wanted him to work for it. My instincts warned me that giving in too easily to Jasper Mortimer was the absolute wrong tactic to take.

With a saucy little smile, I abandoned the bra and reached for the hem of my skirt. He watched me, his face tightening with every passing second as I nudged the material

up my thighs until my panties were exposed. A projection in my mind's eyes of how I looked—semi-naked and sprawled out, open to his gaze—sent a hot rush through me, followed swiftly by a pulse of feminine power as I caught his expression. He liked this. Hell, he more than liked it. In a fight where it seemed I was losing at every turn, it felt good to reclaim some ground.

‘Take my panties off, Jasper,’ I instructed, my voice a husky mess. ‘The bra stays on.’

He didn't need a second bidding.

He dragged my panties off with a smooth move that made my heart miss several beats. And in the flip of a switch, I sensed a shift in the power balance. Firm hands grasped my thighs, parted them boldly so he could stare down at my damp flesh. A deep breath expanded his chest as he passed his thumb over my engorged clit. My whole body jerked, a spasm of pleasure rippling through me at that smallest touch.

Lust-dark eyes darted to my face and then back to my core. ‘I'm going to enjoy fucking you, Wren,’ he declared with gruff anticipation.

His dirty words made me hotter; more impatient. I tried to grasp him with my thighs, nudge him closer, to get this show on the road. Jasper merely smiled, put his thumb to his lips and decadently sucked off my wetness as he looked into my eyes.

‘You want it hard or slow?’

Again, I felt my face flaming, even as excitement fluttered in my belly. No other man had ever asked me that. And how pathetic was that? Or had I not been interested enough before to vocalise my own needs?

‘Do I have to choose? Can't I have both?’

His smile widened, the confident stamp of a man who knew how to wield his sexual prowess. 'You can have whatever you want, sweetheart.'

I swallowed at his thick promise; watched him reach into his back pocket for his wallet. He plucked out a condom, tore it open and gifted me another erotic sight of watching him slowly lower his zip.

I already knew he was thick and long, but I wasn't quite prepared for the beautiful sculpture of Jasper's cock or the pleasure I took in watching him glide on the condom.

Then he was reaching for my thighs, dragging me even closer to the edge of the table. Breathing harshly, he teased his length over my hot, wet core without entering me, his eyes on my face as he tormented me.

Wrapping his hands around my waist, he tilted his hips in one smooth movement and thrust deep inside me. A curious little sound left my throat, a cross between a muted scream and sheer delight at how deeply, completely he filled me. Then for the longest time he held still, his eyes shut and jaw locked tight.

'Again, please,' I gasped.

Exhaling, he withdrew, slowly...and repeated the penetration. Fiery desire shot up my spine, my hands scrambling for purchase on the table. 'Oh, God, again. Please,' I begged.

He gave a low, ragged laugh and started to thrust in earnest. My breath shortened, panted as he fell into a steady, mind-bending rhythm. My eyes drifted closed as pleasure collected deep in my pelvis but after a moment, I prised them open, the need to watch Jasper too overwhelming to deny.

And he was a glorious sight. His hooded gaze was rapt on my face, a lock of hair draped over his forehead as he shuttled in and out of me. Dear God, he was beautiful. An animal. One concentrated fully on me. The fierce light in his eyes said he would deliver on every single sexual promise he'd made.

'Tell me more, Wren,' he urged thickly. 'I want to hear everything you're feeling.'

I wasn't sure why that demand rattled something inside me. When was the last time anyone had asked me what I felt? All my life I'd been subjected to what everyone believed was good for me without considering my input. I knew this was just sex, that he'd set himself a goal he was determined to achieve, but something inside me still lurched as I scrambled around for adequate words to describe this unique experience. 'It feels good. So good.'

'What else?' he demanded, a touch harshly.

'The way you're holding me down. I like it.'

His fingers convulsed on my waist, tightening briefly as he pulled me into another thrust. A tiny scream left my throat, the sensation sharper, even more exquisite. 'Yes! More of that. Faster.'

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‘Fuck yes,’ he breathed, as if I’d delivered the very thing he wanted. He dragged me lower until my bottom hung off the edge of the table. Arranging my legs up until they were curled around his neck, he leaned forward, plastered his lips over mine in a dirty, carnal kiss; a brief but frantic duelling of the tongues before he surged back up. His breath emerging in harsh pants, Jasper widened his stance and slammed even harder inside me. A louder scream left my throat, my back arching off the table as sublime sensation curled through me.

‘Come for me, sweetheart. I need to feel you come all over my cock.’

Needing somewhere on his body to anchor myself, I wrapped my fingers around his forearms. Moments later, I smashed through the barrier of no return.

‘Oh, God, I’m coming,’ I whispered, a strange transcendental sensation washing over me as I was thrown headlong into my climax. It arrived as a forceful tsunami, threatening to rip me apart from the inside. My nails dug into his arms when bliss crashed over me, dragging me deep, deeper than I’d ever been before in my life. Longer than I’d ever experienced.

When the storm abated, when I could again prise open eyes I couldn’t remember closing, it was to find Jasper propped on his elbows over me, his incisive eyes absorbing my every twitch and gasp.

A half minute passed before I realised he was still hard and solid inside me. Shock must have registered because he gave a tight smile, his face a mask of deep arousal, ruthlessly controlled.

‘Did I leave you hanging?’ I attempted to tease, although the shifting emotions inside me left me wildly unsettled in the aftermath.

‘That one was for you. Watching you come was a pleasure I wasn’t about to deny myself.’

‘But?’

He didn’t answer immediately. His head dropped a few inches, his mouth taking my nipple and sucking hard before, at the sensitive shiver coursing through me, he raised his head.

‘But now I get to experience what it feels like to come inside you.’ His voice was a raw throb of anticipation that tingled every nerve in my body.

Before I could draw breath, he snatched me off the table. He disengaged long enough to flip me around and repositioned my legs, until my feet met the floor, and then bent me over the conference table.

Then, as if he had all the time in the world, Jasper ran his fingers through my hair, over my neck and down my spine. He unclasped my bra, trailed kisses where his hands had been, and cupped my breasts. As if he knew how sensitive I was, he merely squeezed and fondled them for another minute without teasing my nipples. Then he nudged me upright; my back to his hot, muscled chest, he wrapped one arm around my waist. ‘Raise your arms, Wren. Wrap them around my neck,’ he whispered in my ear.

Wearing my heels and stockings with my skirt around my waist and my arms angled backwards around his neck, I felt dirty and decadent. Apparently, he thought so too because his breathing grew frantic and rapid. ‘You have any idea how long I’ve imagined you like this?’

I smiled. ‘Hmm, roughly about two weeks?’

He laughed. ‘Try a whole lot longer, sweetheart.’

With that, he thrust upward inside me.

Every single thought dissolved from my brain as Jasper began to fuck me again.

With his free hand he explored me, from chest to thighs and in between, and when I began to lose my mind again, and his thrusts grew erratic and much deeper than I thought possible, his fingers delved between my folds, expertly strumming my clit in exquisite motions that sent me surging into the stratosphere once again.

His head aligned with mine, I heard his low growls as I started to come. ‘Christ, Wren. You feel fucking amazing. So tight and hot and beautiful. Yes, yes, yes,’ he hissed in sync with his thrusts as we drowned in our mutual orgasm.

Coming down from the second high was just as surreal, and when he pulled out of me and perched me on the table, a twinge of loss staggered me. Watching him stroll to the cabinet, I felt weirdly unmoored, turned inside out as I struggled to get my emotions under control.

None of my previous encounters had affected me this much. But this was still just sex. Great sex. It was the height of stupidity to get emotional or evangelical about it. I repeated those words feverishly to myself as he returned. Striving for composure, I lifted my head, meeting his gaze with a cool smile as he set down the stack of tissues on the table. ‘May I?’ he asked.

What little poise I’d scrambled together threatened to evaporate at his request.

Stop it. This didn’t mean anything. So he cared about my comfort. Big deal. About to

tell him I was a grown woman and he didn't need to attend to me, I found myself biting my lip and nodding.

The gleam in his eyes said my answer had pleased him but in the next moment the expression was gone. Surrealness engulfed me again as he cleaned me up, then, plucking my panties off the floor, he sank low and looked up at me. Our gazes connected, I stepped back into my underwear and he pulled it up my legs slowly, his gaze dropping once to rest on my pussy for a long, prolonged moment before sliding the underwear back into place.

Perturbed by how unnerving his aftercare was, how needy it made me feel, I jerked upright and cleared my throat. 'I need to get going.'

Jasper rose calmly, stepped forward and spiked his fingers through my hair. Tilting my face up, he dropped a soft, brief kiss on my lips.

With every cell in my body, I wanted to prolong the kiss. I sucked in a breath when he stepped away, the loss echoing inside me.

God, what the hell is wrong with me?

A little desperately, I retrieved my bra, slipped it back on before reclaiming my blouse. I kept my back to him as I buttoned it up and slipped on my jacket. On slightly firmer ground, I passed my own fingers through my hair and then gathered my papers off the table.

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And turned around to discover Jasper was fully dressed, too. Hell, he was so immaculately put back together, it was as if he'd had way too much experience at this.

Nope. I most definitely wasn't going to think about how often he'd done this. I'd never been possessive or jealous about sexual partners in my life. I wasn't about to start.

'Are we good?' he asked, walking towards me.

My head shot up. 'Of course.'

His gaze raked my face before, nodding, he reached for the control and unlocked the door. 'Good. I'll walk you out.'

I tightened my fingers around my briefcase. This was stupid. I should welcome the chance to escape this room, to regroup. Nevertheless, when his hand arrived in the small of my back, I couldn't help the shiver that coursed through me. I had a long hallway to traverse before I got into the lift; a long hallway where his employees would probably catch a glimpse of my dishevelled state.

'Are you sure everything's okay?' Jasper asked, a frown between his eyebrows.

I started to nod, but then paused.

He leaned down, trailing his lips over my cheek before kissing the corner of my mouth. 'There's a quicker way out of the building if you prefer?'

I looked up, hating myself for the relief bursting through me. Then a thought scythed through the feeling. I glared at him. 'Do you sneak all your lovers through the back door?'

His eyes narrowed. 'Believe it or not, this is the first time I've done it in here. I don't intend it to be the last time though. With you.'

I hated the spurt of excitement that sprang up in my belly. 'The front door will be just fine.'

He smiled, and again I got the funny feeling that I'd pleased him. Mentally, I shook my head. I really needed to get out of here.

Thankfully, the office floor was less busy. And Jasper in calm, professional mode as he walked me to the lift eased my nerves. About to utter a brisk, professional goodbye, I looked up in surprise when he walked into the lift with me. 'What are you doing?'

He didn't answer until the lift doors shut. Then he stepped into my space again, one hand cupping my nape.

'I need one last kiss,' he said gruffly. He sealed his mouth to mine, tongue curling round mine in a kiss so possessive, so hot and sexy, my toes curled. All too soon, the lift reached the ground floor and the doors parted. With clear reluctance, Jasper released me. But not before he caressed his knuckles down my cheek.

'Have a good day, Wren.' And then, as I shakily stepped out of the lift, he added, 'I'll see you back here tonight at six.'

Before I could ask what he was talking about, the doors slid shut.

A little breathless and a whole lot flustered, I stumbled out of his building then paused on the pavement to check the email that had pinged into my inbox. Jasper.

Six hours until your next orgasm. We can use up three of those hours working tonight. Don't be late.

I tried to summon all the righteous indignation I could think of. But as I hurried to my office, all I could think of was how good he'd felt inside me. How the day was going to absolutely drag until I saw him again. How quickly I could make up the extra three hours I needed.

How much I feared—with addiction stamped into my family's DNA—that I was already way too obsessed with Jasper Mortimer's sexual prowess.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THAT BRACING, TERRIFYING thought turned out to be the impetus I needed to block Jasper from my mind for the better part of the morning, despite my phone pinging intermittently with text messages from him. Even the perfectly valid reasoning that answering his texts could be deemed work and therefore contribute towards my six-hour accumulation terrified me a little when my heart leapt at the idea.

Perhaps fate thought it prudent to deliver me from my increasingly frantic Jasper-induced withdrawal symptoms. Because just before midday, when the door to my office swung open, my heart lurched for one giddy moment at the thought that it was him, before plummeting at the sight of the woman framed in the doorway, dressed from head to toe in designer white, complete with radiant pearls.

I couldn't help but wonder if my mother's inability to feel affection for me was because she resented me for choosing to earn my living rather than marry into it, as

she had.

Stifling the bruising thought, I looked past her to a visibly flustered Alana who mouthed Sorry before hurriedly closing the door. 'Mother. Did we have an appointment?'

'You're not senile, Wren, you know we don't. Just as you know the reason I don't have an appointment for this meeting is because you've been avoiding my calls. You've left me no choice but to chance this visit. And you know how I feel about impropriety.'

I gritted my teeth, wondered for a wild moment if one of Jasper's texts had included an invitation for a working lunch. And whether I should've accepted it.

No.

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If my mother was the frying pan, Jasper was most definitely the fire. Regardless of how pleasurable it'd been to dance in the flames this morning, I needed to pace myself or risk being incinerated. Inhaling calm, I rose from the desk, approached where my mother was pulling off stylish winter gloves to drop them along with her designer handbag on the coffee table. My spirits sank lower at the sign that this wasn't going to be a quick visit.

'I'm sorry, I've been busy. What can I help you with?' I asked, keeping my voice even.

Eyes a shade lighter than mine studied me with cool assessment. 'There's something different about you.'

Oh, Christ.

I sucked in another calming breath and reminded myself I was a grown woman, not a child terrified of chastisement or one desperate for her mother's approval. Or, heaven forbid, her mother's love or whatever dregs remained after she'd already given the lion's share of it to her husband and son. 'I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mother.'

One well-plucked eyebrow rose. 'Don't you? Maybe not. But you were definitely more...flappable the last time I saw you.'

I wasn't going to admit, even to myself, that the skirmish with Jasper had helped me tap into confidence and determination reserves that had been in danger of dwindling recently. Perhaps it wasn't even the sex. Maybe it was accepting that negotiating a

better deal with Jasper was better than opposing him and letting Bingham's go down in a fiery blaze. Whatever. For now, I was keeping the wolves away from the company door and I wasn't ashamed about it. 'Perhaps it was because you knew where Perry was and what he was up to but decided not to share it with me?'

My mother was too cultured to roll her eyes but not averse to pursing her lips and delivering a frostier stare. 'Your brother is in Arizona now, getting the help he needs. Let's be thankful for that and not drag him into this, shall we?'

'And what exactly is this?'

She took her time to sit, crossing her long, shapely legs. I thought about offering her tea, then suppressed the urge. Instinct warned me that the reason for her visit wouldn't go down well, tea or no tea. And I wasn't going to prolong it more than necessary. 'You've been seen colluding with that Mortimer boy again, Wren.'

Several protests rushed to the tip of my tongue. Firstly, that Jasper wasn't a boy but very much a man, in every sense of the word. Secondly, that I couldn't wait to collude with him again. In various positions I hadn't been able to stop myself from imagining all morning. 'Again?' I echoed, buying myself a little time.

'Anyone with decent eyesight saw you two at the party. And you've been seen at the Mortimer building, too.'

'Because we're partners in a business deal, Mother. A business deal Perry signed with him, which you already know about. Even if you didn't before, I know you have eyes and ears on the board now.'

'And you assured that same board that you would fix any tiny lapses your brother committed while he wasn't quite himself. Or did I get that wrong?'

My heart hammered against my ribs, this time with anger and pain. ‘You may not want to hear it, Mother, but the problems Perry left behind are a lot more than tiny lapses. I’m just trying to make the best of the situation we now find ourselves in.’

Her face hardened. ‘Is that your way of telling me you’re about to let this family down? Need I remind you that it’s exactly because of that family that we find ourselves in this situation in the first place?’

The vise tightened around my heart. ‘I’m sorry you think I’m letting you down by doing everything I can to save our company. Would you prefer a complete stranger take over, one without the family’s best interests at heart?’

She waved me away with a flick of her wrist. ‘Now you’re just being overdramatic. If your father or Perry were here—’

‘But they’re not!’ The sharp rebuttal stopped us both in our tracks. A flash of pain crossed her face and I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat. ‘They’re not, Mother,’ I repeated firmly. ‘But I am. And I’m doing my best. I promise. Please trust me?’

The plea earned me nothing but a colder stare, which in turn hardened the edges of my pain. ‘And I hate to say this, but regarding the feud—are we really blameless?’ Was Jasper right? Maybe we needed to lance this boil once and for all, give the wound a chance to heal.

Or maybe not; judging by the paleness of her cheeks and the tightening of her jaw, my mother wasn’t of the same mind. ‘How dare you?’

I pressed a hand to my eyes. ‘How dare I? Maybe I’m tired of fighting, Mother. Maybe I just want to use my energies to save this company rather than perpetuating a ridiculous fight that should’ve ended decades ago.’ I dropped my hand.

She surged to her feet, her eyes flashing disappointment that shouldn't have eviscerated me, but did. 'Your father would be ashamed of you.'

Pain lacerated deeper, enough to drive my fingers into the back of the sofa opposite where she sat. 'Just as you are?'

Her delicate nostrils flared, the exquisite cheekbones standing out in relief as she stared at me. 'Excuse me?'

'Nothing I've ever done has been good enough for you, has it?'

Her mouth worked but no words emerged for several seconds. Then, 'You've known since you were a child what I expected of you—'

'What about what I wanted for myself? Did that count for anything at all?' I blurted, aware my emotions were in danger of running away with me.

'What counts, my dear, is that you seem determined to do the opposite of what's expected of you. I've never understood that about you.'

As usual I was getting nowhere. My mother was entrenched in her thinking where I was concerned. No amount of talking would sway her. So I shook my head. 'I don't want to do this now, Mother.'

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‘I should think not. I’m not sure what’s got into you, but you need to remind yourself where your allegiances lie. Your brother most certainly did.’

For a moment I experienced a resurgence of that searing jealousy I’d tried to suppress for so long. My mother’s blind love for my brother and father had made me wonder what I lacked that her love couldn’t extend to me. For so long, I’d hated that I couldn’t answer the question. In my weakest moments, I still did.

But I’d learned to survive without that emotion in my life, hadn’t I? Surely in time I’d learn to do without altogether? The hollow inside me mocked that forlorn hope. If I could live without it, then why had Jasper’s gentleness affected me so much? Why did I, even now, yearn for it when the probability of it being ephemeral—like my mother’s regard—was the true reality?

Just sex. Given and taken. That was all I had to give Jasper. It was delusional to believe I could give anything more when my reservoirs had never been filled.

‘Is that all? I have work to do, Mother.’

Her lips pursed, then she snatched her gloves and bag off the table. ‘If my feelings and opinion are worth anything to you, Wren, then you’ll think harder about distancing yourself from the Mortimer boy. His family have brought us nothing but grief and if they’ve done it once, they’ll do it again. Nothing you say will convince me otherwise.’

She sailed out without deigning to deliver the air-kiss she normally dispensed when we were in public. I told myself I was glad, but the searing realisation that I craved

even that small show of false affection made my gut twist in mild sorrow.

God, was I really that needy?

I was still mired in that maelstrom of anguish and anger when my phone rang minutes later. I reached for it without stopping to check the caller. And experienced a different emotion entirely when Jasper's deep, sexy voice flowed into my ear. 'Sushi or Greek food?'

I scrambled to focus. 'Umm...what?'

'Your choice for lunch.'

'Neither.' My appetite was non-existent after dealing with my mother. 'I wasn't planning on eating lunch. I had a very big breakfast,' I replied, then felt heat swelling through me at the double entendre.

The wickedly sexy man on the other end of the phone laughed, sending electrical currents along my nerve endings, making a mockery of my effort to keep him at arm's length. 'Hmm, so you did.'

'Wow, seriously?'

His laughter deepened, surprisingly numbing a layer of my pain. 'Your fault, sweetheart. You teed that up nicely for me.'

I felt a smile playing at my lips and immediately killed it. 'Thanks for the offer of lunch, but no, thanks.'

Jasper went silent for several moments. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

My fingers tightened on my phone. ‘What makes you think anything is?’

‘Don’t play games with me, Wren. We’re past that.’

That suggested a new level of relationship I wasn’t sure I was ready for, even business-wise. And yet, I found myself answering, ‘I had a disagreement with...someone.’

‘A board member?’ he pressed.

‘No.’

‘Your mother?’

A gasp left my throat before I could stop it. ‘How do you know?’

‘Wild guess. With Perry temporarily out of the picture, I’m thinking it could be one of three problems—board, family or lover. And since I’m your lover and I’m being on my best behaviour...’

The remainder of his deductive reasoning melted away, his words eliciting a fizzle of warmth.

Jasper Mortimer. My lover.

Lover. Love.

The smile evaporated.

No.

‘Wren?’

I snapped back into focus. ‘Yes?’

‘Tell me what’s wrong.’

God, why did that occasional gentleness from Jasper erode every ounce of my resistance? Why did I want to bask in it, roll around in it until I was covered head to toe in warmth?

Because you’ve never experienced a bona fide version of it. Surplus recycled affection has never been enough for you. Never will be.

But was it wise to accept it from Jasper? Was fate really that twisted as to show me a glimpse of what affection looked like from the very last person I could accept it from? Of course, it was. Because wasn’t karma that cruel? I inhaled a settling breath, but he spoke again before I could will common sense into our interaction.

‘Before you tell me it’s none of my business, know that I’ve been in your shoes,’ he said, again in that calm, even voice. ‘More or less.’

Curiosity swallowed me whole. ‘How?’

His laugh was a little sharp. A little edgy. ‘What’s worse than a parent who tells you how to live your life?’

I frowned at the puzzle. ‘I’m...not sure how to answer that.’

‘Try parents who don’t care at all.’

My heart squeezed, this time for the hardened bite of pain he didn’t hide. ‘I... I’m...’ For whatever reason, the sorrow stuck in my throat. Probably because, freshly bruised from my run-in with my mother, a part of me felt as if it was a betrayal to my family. Or maybe I didn’t want even a sliver of softer feelings to slither through my cracks in case the floodgates tore wide open? Either way, bewilderment kept me silent.

‘It’s cool, Wren. Loyalty is a big deal to me, too, even when the people we’re loyal to don’t deserve it,’ he murmured and, absurdly, tears prickled my eyes.

Jesus, I was pathetic. Determined to wrestle my feelings under control, I cleared my throat. ‘Well. This has been fun and all, but I really need to get back to work.’

Expecting him to convince me otherwise, or at the very least remind me I was beholden to him via our contract, I was a little stunned when he said, ‘Okay. Bye, Wren.’

Disappointment seared deep as I ended the call and set the phone down. Then spent an absurd amount of time analysing our conversation. What had his parents done to him? As far as I knew, Jasper’s parents lived overseas. According to the grapevine, they hardly involved themselves in Mortimer businesses any more. Had their reclusiveness extended to their own children? Did I have more in common with Jasper than I wanted to?

Realising I was spending way more time dwelling on Jasper’s phone call than I had my mother’s visit, I fought to put both out of my mind. Until a knock on my door revealed yet another surprise, this time a smiling Alana holding a white takeaway box bearing a well-known exclusive Greek restaurant logo.

‘This just arrived for you. It smells amazing,’ she said, placing the box on my desk

before departing.

The giddiness in my heart bloomed as I reached for the note taped to the side of the box. Opening it, I read the bold scrawl.

They may take your good mood, but never let them take your appetite.

Jasper

The note was so absurd I burst out laughing. On wild impulse, I grabbed my phone and sent a two-word message.

Thank you.

The speech bubble started immediately. Breath held, I waited for his reply.

My pleasure. Oh, and just for clarity, not answering my earlier texts doesn't mean it didn't count as work. I make that sixty-five minutes so far. Call me when you're ready to make up some more time.

I knew I should resist, that I was straying far too close to liking our skirmish-banter-tiny-moments-of-emotional-synchronicity, but I couldn't help reaching for my phone again as I opened the box and groaned at the heavenly smelling moussaka, feta cheese salad and tiny bites of grilled lamb. Helping myself to small portions of each dish, I went through his earlier texts, answering each query between bites.

He didn't answer until the last text and email was sent and I was stuffed to the gills after a final sinful bite of baklava.

Mood improved?

Eyeing the half-empty boxes, I smiled and answered.

Much. Thank you.

Any time. See you tonight.

I sailed through the rest of the day, surprisingly focused after my turbulent emotions, and when I arrived at the Mortimer building to find Jasper caught up in another meeting, the idea that had been mushrooming at the back of my mind on my way over sent me wandering into the empty office next to his. He found me there twenty minutes later, with my copies of the Moroccan deal spread out on the desk while I pored over equipment-delivery schedules and personnel management.

‘Would it be totally sexist to say you look good behind that desk?’ he drawled, leaning casually against the doorjamb.

I bit my inside lip to stop myself from smiling. To stop my insides from melting at the sight of him, tie loosened, hair slightly dishevelled, his long legs and spectacular body framed in a bespoke suit that highlighted his masculine perfection. ‘Yes, it totally would.’

Hazel eyes glinted as he rounded the desk I’d appropriated and perched on the edge, his muscled thighs a tantalising touch away. ‘You should punish me for my heinous crime, then,’ he said in a low purr.

I sat back in my chair, futilely willing my racing heartbeat to slow, while blatantly eyeing him from head to toe. ‘Hmm, I think I will. Just give me a few seconds to devise an adequate torture.’

A sexy smile lifted the corners of his mouth and I tightened my gut against the punch of need that threatened to leave me breathless. His eyes left mine to cast a look

around the room. 'I take it you've decided to make use of the office?'

I shrugged. 'Since the contract says I need to spend time here, I thought this was best.'

His smile widened. 'I agree,' he said, then those sinful eyes dropped to scrutinise my body just as I did his. He swallowed when his gaze reached the hem of my pencil skirt. Desire spiralling through my veins, I deliberately crossed my legs, allowing the hem to ride higher.

When his eyes met mine again, flames blazed high and dangerous. 'Two hours, forty minutes,' he murmured, reminding me of how much time we'd spent on work so far.

A rush of heated anticipation to my core almost made me groan. Correcting him to say he was off by a vital thirteen minutes felt a little too needy so I let it go. 'I have a bit more to catch up on, so I suggest you leave me alone.'

His gaze dropped to my lips, lingering for an indecently long time. 'Can I get a little bit of that punishment first?' he asked thickly.

No. Say no.

Of course I didn't. Because this morning already felt like a lifetime ago. And damn it, he'd fed me and made me feel better after that argument with my mother. What was wrong with a little give?

Relaxing even further in my chair despite wanting to jump him, I crooked my finger. Hunger deepening in his eyes, he gripped my arm rests, his face hovering over mine. Slowly, I wrapped my fingers around his loose tie and tugged him closer until he was a whisper away. Then I slowly licked my bottom lip.

With a deep groan, Jasper breached that last inch between us, yanked the chair close and fused his lips to mine. Decadent minutes of sliding tongues, playful nips and frantic groping later, I pushed him away.

‘I really have work to do, Jasper. And you’re wasting my time.’ I cringed at the breathless mess of my voice.

He stayed where he was for another handful of seconds, his throat working, his eyes fixated on my kiss-bruised lips, savage hunger and a clear reluctance to end our entanglement pulsing from him.

And yes, it pleased a deeply needy part of me to see him fighting his own need for me. Battling to get himself under control. And when I spotted the thick bulge behind his fly, I fought a hard battle of my own. But ultimately, I knew this was for the best. That I needed this vital distance to control my needs. Before they escalated out of my control.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TWOHOURS,THIRTY-NINEMINUTES.

That time was emblazoned across my brain as I guided Wren into the exclusive restaurant in Fitzrovia on Wednesday evening to meet the tequila supplier.

The ambient lighting and tropical atmosphere of the Spanish fusion restaurant suited my mood and I watched the lights play on Wren’s flawless skin as we approached our table. I’d been unable to take a complete breath since she stepped out of her front door wearing the sleeveless, thigh skimming, butt-hugging moss-green dress. The soft material clung to all the right places and I’d barely been able to keep my eyes on the road on the drive over.

I wasn't entirely sure whether to squander the entire time wining and dining this potential business partner and making her wait as payback for the way she'd tortured me for the last two days, or devote exactly two hours and thirty-eight minutes on Paolo Alonso and spend the last minute locating the nearest flat surface to rip Wren's panties off and drive myself into her snug pussy the way I'd been dying to do ever since the lift doors had shut between us on Monday.

Within fifteen minutes of us being seated, I sensed it would be the former, and not because of the need to torture Wren. Our guest seemed hell-bent on a different type of torturing of his own. Paolo was in no mood to discuss business. The Mexican businessman was only interested in regaling us with tall stories of his journey from simple farmer to multimillionaire tequila manufacturer.

Every attempt to steer the discussion back to business was merrily lobbed away.

I was hiding gritted teeth behind a sip of wine halfway through the main course when Wren leaned her elbows on the table and smiled at Paolo.

'La Tromba, the name of your tequila brand. That means whirlwind, doesn't it?' she asked.

Paolo grinned. 'It does, sí. I named it after my wife,' he mused. 'From the moment I met her until now, she has never stopped making my life...interesting.' A faraway look entered his eyes, private enough that Wren looked away. Straight into my eyes. I stared right back, not bothering to hide the depths of my hunger for her.

Her eyes widened a fraction, but, sweet heaven bless her, she didn't shy away from what I was projecting. Which was that I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted another woman. That I intended to have her the second our six-hour deadline was up.

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She matched me look for look, her nostrils flaring slightly as she brazenly acknowledged my intent.

A throat cleared. Paolo. Had he asked a question? Or merely narrated another anecdote? When I looked his way, he raised his glass in a silent salute, which I answered. ‘To feisty women and all the exciting ways they keep us on our toes—eh,amigo?’

‘Sure,’ I responded, then grabbed the bull by the horns. ‘So, are we doing business, Paolo?’

‘It’s probably prudent for me to take a day to think on it.’

‘But come tomorrow you’ll be saying yes, right?’ Wren pressed. ‘Because otherwise you’d be disappointing me greatly for misjudging you for an astute businessman.’

Shrewd admiration flickered in his eyes. ‘Ah, the very fine art of complimenting and challenging that women seemed to have honed over the ages. How can I resist?’

Wren’s gaze met mine and we both silently acknowledged that he still hadn’t said yes. ‘I’ve sent you all the paperwork. What will it take to convince you tonight?’ she asked.

Another flicker of respect, then he set his shot glass down. ‘For La Tromba to be the signature drink you serve on the opening night and for the next seven nights. You can throw your vintage champagne and whatever else you like at your guests, but I want my tequila to be the showpiece. Dare I say even base the whole event around it?’

‘You aren’t trying to hijack my launch by any chance, are you, Paolo?’ I asked, my voice firm enough to reflect my seriousness.

He laughed. ‘I’m striking a good business deal by getting myself as much of the action as I can. You would do the same, my friend.’

‘Seven days is out of the question. But I think we can make something work, can’t we, Wren?’

She nodded. ‘I’ll speak to the event organisers, come up with something to show you by Monday. Provided you give us your agreement tonight,’ she said, her eyes steady on his, her smile replaced by steely determination.

Paolo smiled. ‘I understand why you brought her along, amigo. She drives a hard bargain.’

Wren’s challenging gaze slid to mine, and I fought the urge to squirm in my seat. ‘You have no idea.’

Paolo grinned and smacked his hand on the table. ‘Bueno, we have a deal.’

Wren smiled in triumph. She looked so stunning in that moment, I wanted to climb over the table and taste the beauty of it. The urge intensified as she snuck a glance at her watch. We’d been here close to two hours but Paolo was only halfway through the extensive tapas he’d ordered. At the very least we were looking at another forty-five minutes until this ordeal was over.

I forced myself to finish my steak and salad, my temperature skyrocketing with every sultry glance Wren slid my way.

I almost groaned in relief when the waiter arrived to clear away our plates. Only to

glare at Wren when she smiled and asked, 'Would you like some coffee, Paolo?'

Before I could utter the strenuous objection firing up my throat, her left hand landed on my knee. Without glancing my way, she toyed with her small diamond pendant with her right hand as her left slowly caressed up my thigh.

Was she really about to stroke me into a frothing frenzy beneath the table? Fuck yes, my senses shrieked.

Paolo contemplated the tequila bottle with longing before he shook his head. 'Sí, I'll take an espresso.'

I watched in frustration as the waiter hurried away to fetch the beverage, then I bit back a tight groan as Wren's clever fingers landed on my steel-hard cock. She stroked me through further small talk as we waited for the espresso, and then under cover of observing the waiter set out the coffee, her fingers slowly lowered my zip, reached inside the opening in my boxers and wrapped her hand around my hot length.

Sweet holy hell.

Stars burst across my vision as she stroked me harder, all the while smiling through another Paolo anecdote. When she toyed with the head of my dripping cock, smoothing the liquid over me in an expert pump, I gripped her wrist, terrified for a second that I would disgrace myself in the restaurant.

'Another nightcap, amigo?' Paolo asked, once he'd finally finished his drink.

'No!' I stopped, cleared my throat. 'I mean, I need to call it a night. I have an early morning meeting.'

He looked from my face to Wren's, a smile twitching at his lips before he nodded.

‘You’re right, I better get back to my hotel, too.’

As I reached for my wallet, I wrapped my fingers over Wren’s, allowing her to stroke me one more soul-searing time before easing her away. And then she threatened to blow my head clean off when, under the guise of fixing her hair, she flicked her tongue over the fingers that were wrapped around me a moment ago.

The knowledge that she was tasting me, right there in front of our guest and restaurant patrons, was so shockingly arousing I knew I’d need five minutes to get myself under control before standing. As if she knew the havoc she’d created, she rose. ‘I just need to dash off to the ladies. Shall I meet you at the front entrance, Jasper?’

‘Sure,’ I croaked.

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She smiled, turned to Paolo. 'I'll be in touch in a few days, and I look forward to seeing you in Morocco at the launch.'

'If I didn't think you would do me bodily harm, my friend, I'd think of poaching that one from you,' Paolo said as Wren walked away.

My grin was all teeth, no humour as I stared him down. 'Yes, I would. So don't even think about it.'

He laughed and rose from the table. Jaw clenched and thankful for the low lights in the restaurant, I joined him as we headed for the door.

Once he left, I eyed the ladies' room, every cell in my body straining to storm through the doors, find the nearest empty stall and fuck Wren into a stupor. And damn the consequences. Before I could give in to the urge, I saw her walking towards me.

Bloody hell, she was gorgeous. I wanted her so badly, everything inside me ached with it. The novelty of it all stunned me for a moment, made me wonder if there wasn't something...more to all of this.

Then her perfume was filtering through my senses and I was cheerfully stepping back from examining that peculiar feeling. This was about sex. And business. Nothing more.

Yeah, right... That's why you told her about your rubbish parents. That's why you've been thinking about her non-stop for weeks. That's why something inside you

tightened with unfamiliar concern when you heard the pain in her voice on Monday.

I pushed the mocking voice away and held the door open for her. In lust-charged silence we headed for my car, our strides picking up speed. It was past eleven at night and the street was quiet and dim. Enough for a torrid little quickie. But I didn't want that. Nor did I want to risk someone capturing us on camera. I wanted a feast. I wanted to gorge on Wren until this stark hunger inside me was assuaged. Then I wanted to feast some more.

Nevertheless, for a single moment when we reached my car, we stared at one another across the low hood, her eyes projecting everything we intended to do to each other.

The beeping of her phone wrenched us from the lust trance. When mine pinged five seconds later, the spark in my chest sent fireworks through my blood.

'You set your alarm for the six hours, too?' I asked, inordinately pleased that I wasn't caught in this madness alone.

She shrugged, although a bashful look crossed her face before she composed her expression. 'No need to work overtime if I don't have to.'

'Of course not. You're nothing if not super-efficient, right?' I teased.

The tiniest smile quirked her lips as she slid into the car. I gunned the engine, aiming the car towards the nearest main road when she asked in a low, raspy voice, 'Where are we going?'

My fingers tightened on the wheel. The moment I'd dismissed a quickie on the hood of my car, my mind had zeroed in on the next quickest option. Still, I forced myself to list them all. 'We have three choices. Your place. Mine. Or the penthouse suite at a hotel four minutes away.' My breath locked in my throat, praying she would choose

the last option.

‘Which hotel?’ she asked, her gaze boring into me.

Mentally crossing my fingers, I answered, ‘Mortimer Mayfair.’

Perhaps we weren’t past the hurdles of our family history but surely she wasn’t going to let that get in the way of what we both wanted?

We reached a traffic light and I turned my gaze on her. The look in her eyes was a cross between apprehension and rebellion. It was that same rebellion I’d seen during her interaction with her mother. Wren Bingham wasn’t a woman who toed the line. I freely admitted it was partly what drew her to me. Was she going to throw caution to the—?

‘Okay.’

Scarily heady sensations rushing through me, I caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. ‘Excellent choice.’

I shaved half a minute off our journey time. Using the allocated private parking reserved for my family in the underground car park would add at least five minutes to our trip so I pulled up to the front of the hotel, tossing the keys to the valet the moment I stepped out.

A minute later we were in the private lift. To preserve that little bit of my fraying control, I parked myself in the opposite corner from her, but I still couldn’t keep my eyes off her.

‘You’re looking at me with those caveman eyes again, Jasper,’ she mused, reaching up to free her bound hair in one sexy little move.

Far from being offended, I laughed, then gripped the railing as her hair tumbled down around her shoulders. 'I can't help it, sweetheart. I'm going insane pondering where to start with you.'

Alluring green eyes on me, she reached into her clutch. I wanted to tell her refreshing her make-up was unnecessary since I intended to besmirch it all in the next five minutes. But she chopped me off at the knees by extracting the tiniest, laciest thong I'd ever seen, dangling it right in front of my face. 'Maybe this will help.'

'Fucking hell, Wren,' I croaked, every drop of blood rushing south until I was terrified I was actually going to pass out. 'You left the ladies' room without panties on?'

She stepped forward, raising the scrap of lace higher. 'I was a little too wet to keep wearing them, you see.'

My jaw dropped as the lift doors parted. I stood frozen as she closed the gap between us and tucked the panties into my handkerchief pocket, then sauntered out of the lift, her mile-long legs making short work of the hallway that led to the suite's double doors. She tossed her clutch on a nearby console table, then, with a saucy look over her shoulder, grasped the handles and pushed the doors open. 'Are you coming, Jasper?'

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Sweet Lord in heaven, was I ever? I stumbled after her as she crossed the vast living room to stop in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass window. Below us, London was spread out in a carpet of lights. In the darkened room, all I saw was Wren's stunning silhouette as she braced her hands on the glass.

Before I reached her, I'd wrenched off my jacket containing the panties I was definitely going to keep and unfastened the first few buttons of my shirt.

'I like this view,' she said, casting another wicked look over her shoulder.

'Then stay there. Take it all in,' I suggested, intending to do some sightseeing of my own. I reached her, curled one hand over her plump buttocks as I swept her hair aside and dragged my lips along her elegant neck.

Her shudder and soft moan went straight to my cock. My hand tightened on her soft, rounded arse. 'I should spank this naughty little bottom for walking around with no panties on.'

Her shiver said she liked that idea. Very much. 'Do it,' she muttered, her hands spreading wide on the glass, even as her hips rolled into my groin.

'Fuck, Wren,' I groaned, the indecent thought of reddening her behind punching a fresh bolt of lust through me. With fingers that weren't quite steady, I tugged up her dress as my tongue licked up the side of her neck. The moment she was exposed, I delivered a light slap to her derriere.

A hot little gasp left her lips. 'Oh!'

‘You like that?’ I growled.

‘Yes. Again,’ she commanded.

My fingers delved into her hair, gripped her lightly and turned her head to receive my kiss as I spanked her again. I swallowed her next gasp, devouring it the same way I wanted to devour her. Two spans later and we were both so excited I was in fear of this getting out of hand. Releasing her, I undressed, then reached for the condom. Before me, Wren wriggled out of her dress and bra and tossed them aside, her eyes green flames of need as she watched me.

‘Hurry up, Jasper.’

I tugged the condom on, then froze for a moment, arrested by the spectacular sight before me. ‘Not yet, baby. I need to look at you.’ Despite our previous dalliances, this was the first time I was seeing Wren completely naked. My mouth dried as I took in every inch of her silky smooth skin, the graceful arch of her spine, trailed my fingers from her nape to her tail bone. ‘Fuck, you’re so beautiful.’

Her head dipped a fraction, another bashful look fleeting across her face before the siren returned, her eyes commanding me to grant her wish. ‘I need you inside me, Jasper. Right now.’

And since that was exactly what I wanted, I braced both hands on her hips. ‘Open your legs wider for me,’ I rasped.

The moment she did, I positioned myself at her heated entrance. Then, volcanic need threatening to rip me to pieces, I thrust inside her. Her scream echoed my gut-deep groan. I lost all sense of time and place, the only sensation the tightness of her sheath as she welcomed me in. ‘Fuck, Wren. Fuck!’

‘More, Jasper. Give me more.’

I kept thrusting until sweat coated both our bodies, until her final hoarse scream ended in convulsions that milked my own release from me. Bracing one hand on the glass to keep me upright, I planted kisses on her neck and shoulders as we caught our breaths.

Something inside me tightened when she reached back and trailed one hand over my thigh. The idea that she needed to touch me as much as I yearned to caress her kept me at the window far longer than I would’ve done if she weren’t touching me.

I wasn’t one for post-coital cuddling, and yet I couldn’t find any reason to move away. When my kisses trailed to her jaw and she turned into my kiss, my insides continued to sing and twist and sizzle in a way I wasn’t too keen on exploring. And when she gave another soft moan, I knew I was gone.

‘We did leave it open-ended as to how many times we fucked once the six hours were up, right?’

Her sultry little laugh went straight to my balls, making me hard all over again. ‘I believe we did.’

Bending low, I scooped her up in my arms and strode for the bedroom. ‘Wonderful. Let me know when you’ve had enough.’

‘Let me know when you’ve had enough.’

Jasper’s words reverberated through my mind as I packed for the week-long trip to Morocco a week later. Far from experiencing the emotional apathy I had with my two previous relationships, I felt...alive. Quietly unfettered. As if something inside me were straining to break free.

Perhaps it was all the glorious sex.

Perhaps it was the inroads I'd made into renegotiating the terms Perry had initially tied Bingham's to.

Paolo had signed on the dotted line to be the exclusive tequila supplier for one year in not just the Moroccan resort but in all Mortimer hotels. And as of last night, I'd received a firmmaybefrom Jasper to shorten the one-year profit-margin projections to nine months, a term that I fully intended to reduce to six months before we touched down in Marrakesh.

Success on that front would mean, by summertime, Bingham's could well see a healthy profit from our association with the Mortimer Group. Not that my board was in the mood to heap accolades on my head. Nevertheless, the blatant grumblings had...lessened in the past week. At least from the board members.

My mother on the other hand...

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As if summoned by thought, my phone rang. It took a moment to locate it beneath the mountain of clothes I was sorting through, on account of sudden nerves over which clothes Jasper would prefer to see me in.

The thought that I was even remotely interested in pleasing him made me pause for a shocked moment before answering the phone. ‘Mother, I’m afraid I can’t talk for long—’

‘Why? Because you’ve decided to publicly draw a line in the sand, show me where your true loyalties lie?’

My breath caught at the acid in her voice. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘You were seen, Wren. Coming out of the hotel with the Mortimer boy last week. And don’t bother to convince me it was business.’

My teeth gritted, the urge to demand she stop calling him a boy bubbling up in my throat until I swallowed it down. That insult was minor in the grand scheme of things. As, I was further stunned to realise, was the revelation that I’d been spotted leaving the Mortimer Mayfair. The sharp bite of remorse I expected to feel never arrived. And when I exhaled it was with a certain...pain-edged freedom that made my throat ache when I answered, ‘Okay, then, I won’t.’

It was her turn to gasp. ‘You’re not going to bother denying it?’

‘Why should I, Mother? It’s true. I was in the hotel with Jasper. And it wasn’t business. Is that what you called to condemn me about?’

She went silent for a frozen moment. ‘Of all the men in this town, Wren,’ she asked bitterly. ‘Why him?’

I shut my eyes, a wince catching me hard inside because I’d asked myself the same question at least a half-dozen times since that moment in the maze. And every answer had only deepened my bewilderment. Because not even once had I considered simply...walking away, regardless of the fact that I’d demanded he release me from our business deal. ‘No explanation I give is going to satisfy you, so why put ourselves through it?’ My question emerged solemn and reserved, directly opposite to the churning in my belly. Something was happening with Jasper. Something I seemed powerless to stop.

‘I guess there’s nothing more to discuss, then, is there?’

The finality in her tone unnerved me. Enough to make my answer rushed. ‘Mother, can you trust me for once? Please? I’m trying to salvage this for all of us.’ The worrying thing was, I wasn’t sure if the business was the only thing I was attempting to salvage.

‘You want me to trust you when you’ve openly thrown yourself into the enemy’s bed? Oh, sweet girl, don’t you know this will only have one unfortunate ending for you? Don’t you know that’s what they live for?’

Jasper’s face materialised before my eyes, the ruthless and dogged determination in getting his way. I couldn’t deny that so far things had worked in his favour. Mostly. But I planned on changing that. ‘It...won’t,’ I replied, then...stronger when my voice wobbled, ‘It won’t.’

My mother sighed. ‘Your father deluded himself about getting into bed with vipers once upon a time, too.’

Before I could reply the line went dead.

I hung up, hurt and incensed. And when tears filmed my eyes, I dashed them away with an impatient hand. Wasn't there a saying that history repeated itself only if we didn't learn from it? Why was my mother so determined to write me off?

The answer shook through me, terrifying me into blindly throwing random items of clothing into the suitcase. Who the hell cared what Jasper preferred? I would dress for myself and no one else.

Still, my senses jumped into sizzling life when my phone pinged with a message from him.

Be there in ten.

I was waiting by my front door when he pulled up in his Aston Martin. When he started to get out, I waved him away, wheeling my suitcase towards the boot. 'I'm fine. Just pop the boot, please.'

A frown twitched across his face as he flicked the button. I stymied another flare of unease when I saw his suitcase—a top-of-the-range designer exclusive with his name monogrammed in neat letters.

Get a grip, Wren. You're now annoyed because the billionaire you're sleeping with has nice luggage?

'Whoa, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed, sweetheart?' he enquired dryly when I got into the car.

I shut the door with a tiny slam and yanked on my seat belt. 'What if I did?'

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. 'Right, you're itching to pick a fight with me. Fine. Go ahead. As long as we get to make up properly afterwards.'

That should've angered me more. Instead, part of me leapt in excitement while the painful knot in my belly expanded. I shook my head, my thoughts bewildered. 'Can we just go, please?'

He set the car in motion and stayed silent for the first few miles.

Far from the silence easing my churning emotions, I grew even more unsettled.

After another few minutes, he sighed. 'Can I take a wild guess at what's eating you up? You're raging at fate for matters that aren't in your control? That had nothing to do with you but in which you're fully embroiled somehow? And the more you think about it, the more it pisses you off, and the more ridiculous guilt eats you up?'

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I shifted in my seat, a little riled and lot bewildered by his acuity. ‘Don’t shrink me, Jasper.’

A wry, cynical smile curved his lips. ‘I’m not. But have you considered that I’m stuck in the same situation? My nightmare of a father did something to yours and now the sins of our fathers are being visited upon us.’

‘Don’t you mean the sins of your father?’ I snapped.

He flinched. ‘Since we’re talking about Hugh Mortimer, renowned bastard and destroyer of lives, then yes, maybe I am willing to take full responsibility on his behalf.’

A touch mollified, if a little unjustly since I suspected my father also bore some of the responsibility, I breathed through the easing of the knots inside me. ‘Careful there or I’ll take you up on that mea culpa you’re bandying about.’

He shrugged. ‘Take it, sweetheart. It’s all yours.’

The peculiar thickness in his voice made that curious little hook catch once more in my midriff. Only this time it was positioned higher, dangerously close to where my heart hammered an erratic tattoo. He switched lanes in a suave move, increasing our speed. He said nothing more after that and I gladly welcomed the silence, a chance to contemplate how best to deal with my mother.

When we pulled into the private-jet section of the airport just outside London forty minutes later, it was with the acceptance that it would be better to let things play out,

show her the proof of my success when I accomplished what I meant to. Anything else would be akin to banging my head against a stone wall.

What if it's not enough?

That bleak little question echoed through me, threatening to dull my enjoyment of my surroundings long after I'd boarded the seriously opulent Mortimer jet.

But with the even bleaker thought that this was a cycle I'd found myself repeating with my mother, and that, like before, I needed to snap out of it, I forced myself to look around. To steep myself back into the present as the plane taxied down the runway and rose into the sky with a smooth take-off.

The inside of the 747 private jet was worthy of its own spread in a premium airline magazine. I'd flown in enough such jets in my modelling days to recall that the general layout meant the bedroom suites were located at the back.

Back then, I'd done nothing more than sleep to mitigate jet lag, but I grew hot and needy at the thought of changing that on this trip. The flight to Morocco would take a little over four hours. The possibility of stepping off the plane as a member of the mile-high club made me tingle.

On the tail of that thought, Jasper stepped out of the cockpit where he'd gone after take-off. And just like that, my breathing bottomed out.

In my unsettled mood, I'd failed to clock what he was wearing and as he strolled down the aisle towards me it struck me that I was seeing him in less formal clothes for the first time. Then came the more potent acceptance of how devastatingly handsome he looked in whatever attire he wore. Today's selection of white polo shirt with raised collar, coupled with khaki chinos that hugged lean hips and hard, muscled thighs, lent him a charming swagger and assured sophistication that made my mouth

dry and my chest palpitate like a hormonal schoolgirl the closer he got.

And when he was close enough to touch, those distinctive eyes piercing mine, it was all I could do not to launch myself at him. Because being in Jasper's arms was a guarantee that every other thought would be pushed out. That I would only be consumed by him. Which was a scary thought in itself...

Don't you know this will only have one unfortunate ending? Don't you know that's what they live for?

'You still have war and pain in your eyes,' Jasper murmured, a thoughtful observation forged with a little steel and a lot of contemplation. 'Will you permit me to find a way of combating that?' he asked.

The shiver that went through me was a warning against embracing that offer. It was strong enough to make me shake my head. 'I'll pass, thanks.'

If my answer displeased him, he hid it well. In a blink, the steel was gone from his eyes and he was taking the seat next to mine. 'Something else, then? Champagne? Or shall I order us something to eat?'

With my mother's warning still echoing through me, I lifted a leather briefcase from where I'd dropped it next to my seat.

'I'm not hungry. And the champagne can wait for a while.'

I pulled out the newest version of the contract and placed it in front of him. We'd been dancing around with a parry and thrust that was frankly a little too thrilling. But the bottom line was that I had to secure Bingham's business interests regardless of whether I shared Jasper's bed or not.

‘You said you’d consider a nine-month profit-sharing clause. I’ve changed my mind. I think a six-month contract is a more viable option.’

He remained silent for almost a minute. Then his shrewd gaze flicked over my face. ‘Convince me.’

‘Hobbling Bingham’s into working with one hand behind our backs stymies your productivity, too. We need money to make more money. With an earlier profit-sharing contract, you make half a per cent more than you would in the next six months. I’ve done the figures.’ I rose from the chair. ‘I’ll go and freshen up while you look it over.’

Instead of concentrating on the file I’d placed before him, his eyes travelled over my body. ‘Or we can look it over together and I’ll help you freshen up when I’m done?’

I smiled even while my pulse leapt wildly. ‘No can do. I wouldn’t want to ruin your concentration.’

‘Too late for that,’ he responded, his voice hoarse with arousal.

I leaned over and tapped a finger on the file. ‘Deal with this, Jasper. It’s important to me that we’re on the same page by the time we land.’

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While we'd been embroiled in enough sexual tension to break a few records, business had never been muddled by sex. This deal, for better or worse, meant too much to both of us to allow that so I was confident, once I left the room, he'd give it his full attention. Still, I basked in the sizzling heat of his regard as I headed for the rear of the plane. When the stewardess directed me to the bathroom, I thanked her, then, unable to resist, glanced over my shoulder.

As I suspected, Jasper was engrossed in the file, eyes slightly narrowed as he digested the facts and figures I'd painstakingly put together.

I took my time in the well-appointed bathroom, splashing cool water over my wrists and touching up the very light make-up I'd worn. My unbound hair didn't need much attention, but I ran a brush through it all the same. Then, with nothing more to do, I left the suite.

To discover Jasper had moved from the living area into the business area and spread out more papers on the desk. He looked up as I entered.

'I've read your contract. There are a couple of issues that need ironing out.'

'Oh?' It wasn't a flat refusal. I could work with that.

'I think you're underutilising manpower on the ground. At least three per cent of the staff members can double up on other tasks without affecting quality or productivity. Here, take a look.'

I joined him at the table and within ten minutes I was admitting the sheer genius of

Jasper's input.

'Give me an hour and I'm sure I can find other areas to increase productivity,' I countered.

He gave an appreciative smile. 'Do that and we have a new deal.'

My breath caught. 'Really?'

'Really. And once we're done with that, we can get down to what's bothering you and the reason why you haven't kissed me since I picked you up.'

CHAPTER NINE

HERFEATURESTIGHTENEDand I knew she was about to shut me down. 'I don't need you to fix my problems, Jasper.'

An expected response. One I fully intended to smash through. 'When that problem directly impacts me, I think I'm entitled to a basic understanding of what's going on.'

Her eyes flashed with annoyance. And I admitted quietly to myself that it was way better than the bitter, silent pain I'd seen there before. That kind of pain was acidic, had a tendency to eat away inside you until only a husk remained. The last thing I wanted to see was the woman I was growing increasingly attached to stripped of her vibrancy. Of the passion that blazed through everything she did.

'Impacts you in what way?' she challenged.

I raised my eyebrow and let her read the answer on my face.

'You mean sex?' There was a tight edge to the question that made me wonder if the

surface answer wasn't what she wanted. And fuck if that didn't thrill me. I wasn't sure how much of myself I could give but if she wanted more, I would oblige. Up to a point. Because I was a Mortimer, after all. And we were renowned for the amount of dysfunctional baggage we tended to lug around.

'Not necessarily. But I expected the trip thus far to be a little more...stimulating.'

She stiffened, her back going ramrod straight. 'I didn't throw myself into your arms like an overeager teenager when you rocked up in your fancy car, so I must be defective somehow?'

'Stop. You're deflecting.' I hardened my voice.

She opened her mouth, about to snap my head off, but then swallowed and looked away. The weight of that action sat uncomfortably in my gut. Wren never shied away from confronting me. Added to that weight was the realisation that I would fix it, regardless of what it was. Regardless of my suspicion that this would hit close to my own parental issues. Issues I'd happily placed in a vault my whole life.

I cupped her chin and redirected her gaze towards me. 'Tell me what's bothering you, Wren. I may not have crystal-clear answers for you but, much like this contract here, we can figure our way through it, even if it requires several iterations before we're satisfied with it.'

Her eyes grew suspiciously filmy, then she blinked them clear. 'It'll take much longer than a few weeks of hard negotiations to unravel a lifelong conundrum.'

Her voice was solemn, much more subdued than I'd ever heard it, and that unnerving weight in my gut grew.

I rubbed my thumb over the smooth-as-silk skin of her jaw, felt her pulse leap

beneath my touch. 'I get that. But conundrums remain that way if you leave them alone. Shove them into the light. Show them to me, Wren. I want to see.'

'Why?' she asked, her voice a little bewildered.

Why indeed? I could've given her the flippant answer, told her I was a ruthlessly determined Mortimer who despised secrets and wanted full disclosure for the sake of our business dealings. But since I hid fat, ugly secrets of my own...

I shrugged. 'I've seen you in business mode and I've seen you content with a well-put-together meal. I've watched you wow a room full of corporate sharks and had you aggravate me with a trench coat I'm still determined to burn the first chance I get. Your many facets fascinate me. This sad version of you irks me. If helping you work through your pain is the only way for you to free yourself of it, then it's a task I'm volunteering to undertake. No strings attached.' Yeah, that last bit was a white lie. I wanted a few strings. The kind of strings that made me want to feed her when she was hungry. Tear a few arseholes to shreds when they upset her. Bask in her smile when she was happy.

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She swallowed, and I caught another sheen of tears in her eyes. Then, determinedly, she dragged her chin from my loose grip. 'I won't be deemed weak by divulging things that trouble me, Jasper,' she said, her voice low but stern, her warning clear.

'Believe me, Wren, you're the last person I'd consider weak.'

Green eyes locked on mine, probing for several moments before, satisfied by whatever she was looking for, she nodded. 'Let me get this business out of the way. Then I'll let you feed me champagne and whatever delights your chef has in store for us.' Her gaze flicked past me to the double doors that led to the master suite. 'I might even let you experience that other facet of me you enjoy so much. Then...maybe I might tell you a thing or two about...stuff. Agreed?'

The weight shrank in direct proportion to my expanding relief. 'Agreed, but with one tiny addendum.'

One perfect eyebrow rose. 'Yes?'

'Since you'll be working full-time on Mortimer business, shall we dispense with the six hours nonsense?'

Her smile slowly grew, banishing a few shadows in her eyes. And the reappearance of my vibrant, gorgeous Wren made something unnervingly vital shake loose and free inside me. Instinct warned me that it might be irretrievable. For the moment, I didn't scramble to chase after it. Because her smile was knocking me for six and I wanted to bask in it until I passed out.

‘You have yourself another deal, Jasper Mortimer.’

It was a good and bad thing that Wren was a meticulous businesswoman. It meant that she came up with the goods eventually. But it also meant that we were left with only forty minutes to eat and fuck by the time she presented me with the promised solution. I happily signed on the dotted line of the new contract while the stewardess poured the celebratory champagne. The moment she left us alone, we wolfed down the succulent array of canapés and finger food the chef had prepared before we stumbled into the master suite.

‘Bloody hell, we only have thirty minutes,’ I grumbled against her lush lip as my fingers dived beneath the light pink cashmere sweater she’d worn to combat the cool English weather.

Her laughter was sultry and musical, her earlier mood finally evaporated as she tackled the zip to one ankle-high boot. ‘I’m confident you can make me come at least...twice before we land.’ She drew back, teasing in her eyes. ‘I’m not overestimating your prowess, am I, Mr Mortimer?’

I chased after her cheeky mouth, playfully biting her lower lip before I growled against it. ‘Challenge fucking accepted.’

We tumbled into bed in a tangle of half-undressed frenzy, laughing and growling our frustration until, gloriously, she was naked, her sinuous body warm and welcoming beneath my eager caress.

Knowing I had to wait a few hours more to discover what was bothering her threatened a return of that unease, but then she was rising above me, a siren with her willing captive, the look on her face ethereal and breathtaking as she sank down, taking me inside her tight, hot channel. Then she rolled her hips in a sensual claiming that had my breath hissing out.

‘I love it when you do that.’

Hands on my chest, she smiled wider until I was certain I would get lost in it. I didn’t give one little damn. Instead I focused on rising to her sensual challenge, my own smug smile appearing when she threw her head back and screamed her first orgasm. Then a second. And just for the hell of it—and probably irritating the hell out of my pilot for ignoring his announcement to return to our seats and fasten our seat belts—a third.

She was locked in my arms, light shudders wracking her beautiful body, as the wheels touched down in a smooth landing in Marrakesh.

From the many hours of work I’d poured into the project, I knew the resort was situated on the outskirts of Marrakesh, midpoint between Essaouira and Agadir. What I hadn’t known was that we would be travelling there by helicopter after disembarking Jasper’s plane.

A further surprise arrived when he slid behind the controls of the sleek and powerful-looking aircraft with discreet lettering announcing it as a property of the Mortimer Marrakesh Resort.

‘You’re piloting this thing?’ I asked when he donned the headgear and passed me a smaller set.

His teeth flashed in a boyish grin that tunnelled straight into my chest. ‘Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ve had a pilot’s licence since I was twenty-one. I think it’ll come in handy when I have to step in to ferry VIP guests to the resort. And who knows? It might even knock a quarter per cent off your staffing streamlining.’

Two things struck me just then, the first being that Jasper would most likely spend a great deal of his time here to ensure the resort got off to the good start the projections

predicted. And secondly that his absence would...devastate me.

Because...because...

My mind seized up, unable to grapple with the emotions mushrooming inside me.

‘Wren?’

I heard the frown in his voice but couldn’t summon the nerve to look him in the eye. In case he read the very thing I was unable to accept myself? Still feeling tasered by emotions I wasn’t ready to deal with, I answered, ‘Yeah, sure, I think we can manage that.’ Aware that my answer was spacey at best, I forced myself to rally and smile his way as I slid on my head gear and buckled up.

Hazel eyes bored into mine for an extra few seconds before his large hand squeezed my bare thigh. ‘You good?’

Perhaps because he was inside me less than twenty minutes ago, or because I was really losing my mind, I dropped my hand on top of his. ‘Yes. I am.’

His answering smile hit me square in the solar plexus but even though I was braced for it, it still took my breath away. As did the arid but incredibly stunning landscape as we took off and headed west.

I basked in the beauty of Morocco, happy to play tourist as Jasper pointed out various landmarks. But the most breathtaking of all was the distant but majestic vista of the endless, snow-capped Atlas Mountains, a watchful range of giants dominating the horizon.

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‘The resort is coming up now, on your right,’ Jasper said after fifteen minutes, his voice intimate through the headphones.

Sliding up sunglasses I’d worn to protect against the mid-afternoon sunlight as he went low enough for a close view, I was awed all over again at my first sight of the hillside resort.

Rather than one giant building, it was a sprawling collection of sand-coloured mini castles, joined together by long interconnecting walkways, which would offer spectacular views of landscaped gardens and the Atlas Mountains on either side through elegant Moorish archways.

After landing and an introduction to the general manager in the cool, marble-floored interior of the staggering beautiful reception, I discovered on the tour that followed that those archways had been painstakingly hand-painted in swirls of gold and bronze and turquoise.

Each mini castle contained four luxuryriadpenthouses, complete with private pools, hammam suites and endless sources of pampering and relaxation facilities, a true desert oasis unlike any other.

While I’d seen it all laid out in one report or another in the past few weeks, experiencing it in person was a thrill that drew increasingly loud gasps from me as we toured the extensive grounds. At my latest one, Jasper turned to me, a wide grin splitting his exceedingly handsome face.

‘Am I blowing your mind a little bit, sweetheart?’ he drawled, assured in that fact

even before I answered.

‘You’re blowing my mind a lot,’ I replied. And not just with the architecture. More and more, it seemed as if getting on the plane and leaving England behind had lifted a layer of tension off us despite our little charged conversation.

His smile widened, then slowly morphed with sexual heat, increasing in temperature until that space between my heart and stomach tightened with a new kind of tension. The one that warned the addiction I’d feared I was succumbing to had probably passed the point of no return.

When he caught my hand in his and brushed his lips across my knuckles, I experienced an even harder kick. And when he kept hold of my hand for the remainder of the tour that once again led us outside, I let him, that fiercely intimate connection of palms gliding together a sensation I suddenly didn’t want to do without.

Outside, a long rectangular pool was banked by a palm grove, offering the perfect balance of sun and shade that meant guests could linger for hours, the inviting water sparkling in the sunlight.

A little further on, amongst fig and citrus trees that sweetly scented the air, giant awnings resembling the wings of a Bedouin tent offered more stations of shade, with plump cushions and beaten leather pouffes laid out on Persian carpets. It was a seductive and decadent invitation to lounge and indulge, to free up one’s senses to the pleasures the resort provided.

I felt the last of the tension leave my body as we meandered back into the resort.

‘Ready for the pièce de résistance?’

‘There’s more?’

His hand tightened around mine. ‘The jewel in the crown. You’ll like it, I think.’ He stopped to order a tray of mint tea and refreshments at the concierge desk before ushering me into a discreetly tucked away lift that didn’t jar with the blend of traditional and contemporary gold and turquoise decor. Pressing a button that only had a star next to it, he pulled me into his arms as the lift doors shut, content to simply hold me as we were whisked seven floors up.

We stepped into the foyer of what was clearly the largest of the mini castles. A discreet plaque announced it as the Tower Suite and I soon discovered why when, after a jaw-dropping tour of the decadent master suite housing the largest four-poster bed I’d ever seen, I stepped out onto an equally vast terrace. No, to call it a terrace was a gross understatement.

The tennis-court-sized space came complete with turrets, parapet and three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views, the interior accommodations perfectly centred and smaller versions of the whole resort repeated in the vast space.

‘Oh, my God, this is incredible! You can experience everything the resort has to offer without leaving the tower if you don’t want to.’

He nodded. ‘That was the general idea. Even the desert sand can be brought to you if you wish it.’

Stopping at the rectangular bathing pool fashioned from the same coloured turquoise tiles accenting the decor, I trailed my fingers through the cool water. ‘I’ve never felt the need to be clean the way I do right now.’

Strong arms wrapped around my waist, his voice a husky rasp in my ear, ‘Hmm, I can’t wait to watch you bathing under the stars, with just moonlight covering your

skin. Well...moonlight and me.'

My laugh felt as unfettered as the contentment seeping into my bones. Then, his words sinking in, I turned within the confines of his arms. 'Wait, I don't get my own suite?'

He looked a little startled, then mutinous before he quirked one brow at me. 'Do you want your own suite? I'm sure I can organise one for you if that's what you want?' His tone said he would do so reluctantly.

But it was a moot point anyway because it wasn't what I wanted. I yearned to spend every spare moment with him. 'No. I'd love to share this suite with you.' Why not go all out and embrace this temporary insanity?

The shadows left his eyes, that almost conceited confidence drenching his smile. 'Brilliant answer.'

The wind-chime doorbell went and Jasper excused himself to answer it. A sharply dressed waiter wheeled out a silver trolley, positioning it under one of the four awnings where a traditional floor seating of rugs and cushions was laid out.

'Thank you, Azmir. I'll take care of the rest,' Jasper said.

The waiter left with a huge tip and a wide smile and when Jasper held out his hand, I joined him, happily kicking off my platform shoes that went with the orange and white polka-dot sundress I'd hurriedly changed into before disembarking the plane.

Reclining against one thick cushion, I accepted a plate of sandwiches, which I finished in record time. With my second cup of mint tea, I sighed my pleasure at my surroundings.

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Everything I'd experienced so far impressed a bone-deep belief that I was doing the right thing by not walking away from this deal, regardless of what my mother wanted. It had every promise of becoming the kind of exclusive, six-star resort reserved for the elite. Even without the Mortimer name attached to it. And with Jasper fronting it, I wouldn't be surprised if there was already a mile-long waiting list.

No wonder Perry had bent over backwards to grab a piece of this.

Thoughts of my brother made my mind veer down a different path.

'Hey, why the frown?' Jasper asked.

About to give an evasive answer, I surprised myself by blurting out the truth. 'I was thinking about Perry. I'm wondering whether he'd think I've stolen this project from him. It was his baby, after all.'

It was a testament to the kind of family we both came from that he didn't think the question absurd considering Perry and I were siblings, supposedly working for the same team.

'Have you heard from him?'

I shook my head, a wave of concern and sadness washing over me. 'I don't expect to even if places like that allowed contact with family. Things weren't that great between us even before all of this.' I waved my hand at the resort.

Jasper nodded. 'You think he'll be angry because he'll believe he teed it up for you to

hit the winning shot?’

I frowned, knowing he was making a point. ‘You don’t think he did.’

He snorted. ‘Absolutely not. And I’ll be happy to set him straight on that score. Sure, you and I have had a few ups and downs but think of the progress we’ve made in the last three weeks. It sure beat the months I was chasing him around to stop this project from suffering a catastrophic and costly setback.’

The praise was welcome but the hollow feeling inside remained. ‘Telling him is one thing. Getting him to accept it might be something else.’

‘And you believe it’s that something else that might drive a deeper wedge between you?’

Feeling a mournful little lump climbing into my throat, I took a hasty sip of tea. ‘I don’t know. On the one hand it seems inevitable that he’ll resent the progress I’ve made. On the other, I’m hoping I get lucky and he comes out of rehab, all goodness and mercy, champing at the bit to end our...estrangement.’

Jasper only frowned deeper. ‘Were things really that bad?’

My lips twisted, my inner voice mocking the hope of my latter statement. ‘You sound surprised. I got the impression your family wasn’t sweetness and light, either.’

His lips twitched sardonically. ‘We aren’t but our dysfunction is curiously programmed to infect the parent-child bond rather than the sibling one. Don’t get me wrong, Damian only recently emerged from some self-imposed secondment in New York and Gem is busy with her own family.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t see much of them, anyway.’

‘And let me guess, you prefer it that way?’

The flash of disconcertion on his face told me I’d hit the nail on the head. For some reason, that deepened the chasm yawning inside me.

Before I could ask him more questions about his family—mainly to deflect from answering painful ones about my own—his eyes speared me again. ‘Was that what was bothering you this morning? The friction between you and Perry?’

Staring into the leafy green depths of my tea, I answered, ‘No, it was the parent-child part. I’m lucky enough to have it from both sides.’

‘Tell me,’ he encouraged, much as he had on the plane this morning.

‘My mother saw me leaving your hotel last week. Amongst my many other failings, that apparently makes me an irredeemable traitor to my family.’

His jaw clenched tight, his face a gathering thunderstorm. ‘Wren—’

‘Which is rich, considering they barely acknowledge my existence ninety-nine per cent of the time. I’ve been barely a Bingham since before my father died.’

This time my voice did break the smallest fraction. He heard it. Abandoning his tea, he slid his fingers over my nape and pulled me into a tight embrace. Unfortunately, that only reminded me of every other embrace I’d been deprived of for as far back as I could remember. I dissolved into Jasper’s arms, tears I seemed to have battled all day resurging, this time spilling down my cheeks as I buried my face in his chest.

I felt...cherished. Protected in a way I’d never done before in my life. As unwise as everything indicated, I wanted to hang on to it. Absorb it into myself until it became a part of my soul. Until I could look back on it some time in the dismal future and bask

in its afterglow.

‘I’d love to say fuck them all but it’s not as simple as that, is it?’ he rasped, a deep understanding in his voice that spoke of his own demons.

Tears welled faster. ‘No, it’s not.’

His chest heaved in a long sigh, then I felt his lips brush the top of my head. ‘Our inability to kick them permanently out of our lives doesn’t mean they get to control us, though, correct? Only you have the power over you. No one else.’

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The depths of bitter conviction in his voice said this was as much about him as it was about me. I looked up and his jaw was set in iron, his gaze on a faraway point I suspected didn't involve me. And yet, I still felt...wanted.

The earlier need to probe his own family situation rose again but I was a little terrified and a lot selfish to lose the warmth and security of his arms. So I bit my tongue, closed my eyes and breathed him in.

After an eternity, I felt his gaze on my face. 'Are you glad you came? And don't say yes because this is work,' he tagged on gruffly.

Raising my gaze, I met his. 'Yes, I'm glad I came,' I replied, my voice a husky mess. We were crossing an invisible but dangerous line and yet, I was...exhausted with resisting its magnetic pull.

Jasper dropped his head slowly, and I held my breath until his lips sealed over mine. We kissed with slow languor, allowing the heat to build between us until we were both breathless.

He raised his head in torturous increments and when he spoke, his lips still brushed mine. 'The sunsets here are quite spectacular. Want to experience the outdoor bath tonight?'

I shook my head. 'Too tired to appreciate it,' I replied, just as a yawn caught me unawares.

He stood and held out his hand. 'I think an early night is on the cards. We have a full

day tomorrow.'

I frowned, trying to remember the itinerary and realising...there was none. 'What exactly is happening tomorrow?'

That boyish grin, totally lethal to my state of mind, flashed into life as I let him help me up. 'Everything.'

With that ominous declaration, he tugged me back into the room, to the master suite. Then, catching my hem, he freed me of my dress and panties, and nudged me into the bathroom. Bypassing the Jacuzzi bath, he switched on the jets in the shower, then made short work of undressing himself. All the while watching me with an expression that made my breath catch and my heart squeeze.

To mitigate the erratic mess that was my pulse and my emotions, I reached for an apple-shaped bottle with an exquisitely carved stopper top in the shape of the M'Goun Valley rose, the national flower of Morocco.

Jasper stopped me with a soft grip. 'No, let me.' He took the bottle, uncapped it, poured a decent measure into his palm, then motioned for me to come closer. I watched him rub his hands together, that simple act so intensely erotic, my nipples beaded and my thighs clenched hard with desperate need. 'I've dreamed of at least two dozen ways to do this.'

Swaying towards him, I lifted eyelids that were curiously heavy to meet his gaze. 'We've showered together before.'

'Hmm, but always when one of us had to rush off somewhere. Or when one of us needed to fuck the other super urgently.'

Heat rose up my body. Yes, so I'd attacked him the last time we'd been in the shower

together. ‘No need to rub it in my face.’

‘Oh, I intend to rub it in all right. All over your body.’

Laughter caught me completely unawares, a peculiar strain of joy fizzing through me. It died in a sigh as Jasper’s hands proceeded to wreak exquisite magic on my body. I didn’t bother to hold back my moans of pleasure because it felt disingenuous in this place. Instead, I closed my eyes and gave myself over to him. And by the time he swung me into his arms and carried me to the four-poster, I was a boneless, mindless creature, ready to receive everything he had to give.

Like the kiss before, the lovemaking was indulgent, decadent and slow, tapping into the rhythm of the land.

And just like before, I blinked back tears when it was over. Then gasped with a different sort of pleasure when, with a touch of a remote, the doors slid back to reveal the insanely gorgeous sunset he’d promised.

From the perfect vantage point of our bed, it felt as if we were being treated to the creation of an extraordinary oil painting. The world itself seemed ablaze, streaked with the richest scarlet, vibrant orange and saffron yellow.

‘My God, that’s beautiful,’ I whispered.

Jasper pulled me tighter against him. ‘Yes. And just in case I didn’t mention it before, I’m glad you came, too.’

Later, when it all went wrong, I would remember this moment.

The moment that last sane string unmoored me from reality as I knew it and gaily wove its way through the air into the hands of the last man I should’ve trusted it to.

The next day, rested and sated from glorious early-morning sex, we set off on dune buggies to a desert encampment half a mile away that formed part of the resort. The objective of the visit was to judge the experience as a possible business retreat and relaxation exercise. The twelve Bedouin tents were each large enough to host up to thirty guests and, as evidenced by the signals from our laptops as we got down to work, the business facilities were more than adequate.

By lunchtime we'd pronounced it a success and moved on to the next item on the agenda. Thrilled at the rate we were checking things off our extensive to-do list, we didn't stop until after the sun had gone down.

Dinner was an exquisite lamb and vegetable couscous cooked in an authentic tagine, followed by a creamy locally made dessert of sugared almonds and crushed dates served over a baked yoghurt. Over rich, cream-laced coffee, Jasper regarded me with heavy-lidded eyes. 'I'm getting you in that bath tonight.'

Since the stars were shining bright and I'd had exactly the same idea, I smiled. 'You have my full cooperation.'

With a heart-stopping smile, he reached for the tablet next to his coffee cup. I'd discovered to my delight that most amenities within each suite could be operated digitally and when I heard the sudden rush of water hitting the cavernous bath, my temperature rose. I set my coffee down as Jasper reclined back in his seat, his eyes promising everything he intended to do to me. But I intended to flip the script on him tonight.

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‘How long do we have until it’s ready?’

‘About eight minutes.’

I smiled. ‘Hmm, that’s long enough.’

Telltale heat scored his cheekbones. ‘For?’

‘For me to drive you a lot crazy.’ I crooked a finger at him. He rose, prowling over to me in a way that made every cell in my body sing. When I made space between my knees, he stepped into them, hands hanging loose at his sides.

Slowly, teasingly, I placed my hands on his calves, then dragged them up. Arousal darkened his eyes as I explored muscular thighs for several seconds before heading north. He hissed out a breath when I brushed my knuckles over his very prominent erection. Keeping my eyes glued on his, I unbuttoned his chinos and drew down the zip. Another slow but firm tug freed his beautiful, engorged cock.

I gripped him, revelling in the hot smoothness of him, while attempting to contain the wildfire hunger rushing through me.

Still keeping my gaze on him, I pumped my hand once...twice. ‘Would you like me to taste you, Jasper?’

His fists clenched convulsively. ‘Holy hell, yes,’ he rasped.

Moaning in anticipation, I leaned in close and wrapped my mouth over his broad

head. A thick groan left his throat and I felt a light tremor wash through him. Ravenous, I took more of him in my mouth, my tongue shamelessly circling and licking as pleasure swelled through me.

‘Ah, that’s so good, Wren.’

I explored his cock from root to tip, licked and sucked and teased until he was panting, one hand firmly lodged in my hair as he fucked my mouth. I was so absorbed by the filthy and beautiful act, I protested when he started to draw away.

‘I’d love to come in that gorgeous mouth of yours, sweetheart, but the bath’s waiting.’

The bath I’d forgotten about. A little drunk on him, I watched him tear off the rest of his clothes, then tackled mine. Together we stumbled to the immense rectangular bath that could easily have accommodated a dozen.

Jasper paused long enough to tug on a condom before stepping into the warm water and helping me in. Dropping down onto the last step, he stared up at me, his eyes blazing. ‘Do it, Wren.’

With a needy moan, I braced my hands on his shoulders. Then slowly, my eyes locked on his, I sank down, taking him deep inside me. Shudders of bliss wracked us both as I fucked Jasper into a panting frenzy. Lips bruised, nails raking over flesh as our simultaneous orgasms swept us under.

And when it was all over, he carried me deeper into the water, making space for me between his thighs so I could recline against him. Soft lingering caresses followed, my dreamy gaze on the stars above our heads as minutes drifted by.

Perhaps it was that sense of being untouchable by life’s cruelty in that special

moment that made me speak up just then. 'Can I ask you a question?'

His answer was a contented rumble, his lips trailing kisses against my bare shoulder. 'Sure.'

'Your father. You called him a destroyer of lives. Why?'

Jasper stiffened behind me, the hand caressing my thigh freezing. 'Bloody hell, Wren,' he replied. 'I have the most beautiful woman in the world bathing under moonlight with me. The last thing I want to talk about is my father.'

I said nothing, leaving him with the option to answer or not.

Another minute drifted by. 'Fine. Yes, he was.'

'Why?'

Another long pause. 'He called me weak for trying to be the peacemaker of the family. For as long as I could remember, he butted heads with Damian. Even Gem, to some extent. But I was the boy who wouldn't fight the bullies in school; the one who happily gave away his pocket money to the poor kid I felt needed it more.' Bitterness coated the laughter that punctuated his words. 'He particularly hated that when my teachers mentioned it to him, thinking they were doing me a favour and praising me for it. What they didn't know was that Hugh Mortimer was all for anarchy in the name of dividing and conquering.'

It was my turn to stiffen, the evidence of his father's ruthlessness the very thing that had created our feud in the first place. But as I heard his clear opposition my soft heart felt for him.

'He would've been prouder of me if I'd thumped everyone who eyed me the wrong

way. And he didn't pull his punches by keeping that shit to himself.'

I twisted in his arms, my shocked gaze searching his. 'He hit you?'

Relief poured through me when he shook his head. 'No. Weirdly enough, he had a line he wouldn't cross. Apparently. But he wasn't shy about delivering emotional bruises.' He laughed again.

I cupped one taut cheek. 'Jasper, I didn't mean to bring it all up—'

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‘It’s fine. He’s no longer in my life. And I may be many things now but weak I’m definitely not.’ The harsh proclamation sent a cold shiver over me.

No, Jasper Mortimer wasn’t weak. I knew that first-hand.

And when he dragged his lips over my jaw and unerringly claimed my mouth again in a ruthless kiss, I wondered whether there was a warning in there for me, too.

CHAPTER TEN

‘MORNING,SLEEPYHEAD.’

The miniature roller coaster that had taken residence inside me over the last three days since our arrival in Marrakesh performed a deep spiral at the sound of the sexy voice in my ear. Despite the sensation, I grinned, rolling over to find Jasper perched on the side of the bed, completely naked and looking gloriously virile in the morning light.

‘Sleep well?’

I nodded, sighing at the memory of what felt like the best three days and nights of my life. Days filled with work that didn’t feel like work at all and nights of transcendental sex.

‘Good.’

Hoping I’d get a good-morning kiss, I silently grumbled when he turned away and

reached for something on the bedside table. ‘Pick one.’

I glanced down at the two envelopes stamped with the Mortimer logo in one corner. The wicked gleam in his eyes made me glance suspiciously at the mysterious offering. ‘I don’t think...’

‘Do you trust me?’ he murmured.

The right answer was...no. Perhaps love and affection were conditional but I’d discovered that even after jumping through hoops the way I’d done for my family for most of my life, they’d still let me down. And while cloud nine felt like pure heaven, my instincts shrieked for me to beware. Or, at the very least, take it down a notch the way I’d been utterly unable to since we arrived.

‘Don’t overthink this, Wren,’ he said, his voice a low rumble. ‘It’s all good, I promise.’

Stupid tears clogging my throat, I plucked the nearest envelope and tore it open to distract myself before I blubbered in front of this man. Again. The words blurred for a minute. When I blinked and they came into focus, my stomach dropped to my toes.

‘No way. I want the other one.’ I lunged for it.

He held it out of reach, his hazel eyes dancing with humour. ‘No, you picked that one, so we’re doing that. Unless you’re afraid of heights?’

‘I never agreed to abide by your rules. And no, I’m not.’

A glimpse of steely ruthlessness surfaced in his eyes. ‘So are you going to back out or are you going to trust me?’

Like before, I felt as if he was testing me, weighing me up for something more profound than...sweet heaven...paragliding in the desert. Again, the urge to say no pummelled me. Again, I held it at bay. Then I responded with a compulsion pulled from deep within me. 'Okay, fine. I'm going to trust you. This once,' I added, drawn by a desperate need to protect myself, emotionally and otherwise, despite the growing suspicion that it might already be too late.

An hour later, after a succulent Moroccan breakfast of yoghurt, dates, rich coffee and muesli, we left the resort.

I was pleasantly surprised when we arrived at the adventure camp set several hundred metres high up in the High Atlas Mountains. The makeshift camp I'd expected turned out to be a first-class, well-run outfit, with different groups for different levels that put me slightly at ease. The safety lesson further eased my nerves, enough to spark excitement. But not enough to fly solo when given the option.

The smouldering looks Jasper sent me as we suited up said he was pleased I'd chosen to double up with him; the intimacy of being strapped in tight against him only underlined that fact.

Regardless of all of that, my nerves nearly gave out as we stepped closer to the cliff edge.

'Jasper...wait, I don't think I want to do this—'

'One small step, Wren. That's all it takes,' he whispered in my ear. 'One small step and the belief that you're not alone. That I won't let anything happen to you.'

Dear God, what was he doing to me? I glanced back at him, saw the unshakeable promise in his eyes, and just like last night I wanted to open myself up and fill my soul with it. For however long it lasted.

With that assurance cloaking me, I swallowed, stepped forward into nothingness and felt my belly drop away from my body.

For the first five seconds, sheer terror gripped me, my scream searing my throat. But over the strong rush of air, Jasper spoke again. ‘Sweetheart, open your eyes. See what your bravery has earned you.’

Reluctantly obeying, my jaw dropped as the beauty of my surroundings slowly engulfed me.

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Now that we were in the air, it was as if I were sitting on a soft, swaying cushion. And below us, the majesty of the mountains and trails gave a true bird's eye view. 'This is...incredible,' I murmured, delight replacing terror.

'Told you,' Jasper said smugly.

I glanced up, saw his smile and the easy confidence with which he operated the glider and ventured a smile of my own.

'Want to go higher?'

At my nod, he sent us soaring higher, then, before I could catch my breath, his lips pressed close to my ears. 'Look to your left.'

I looked and gasped out loud. 'Oh, my God.'

A flock of grey-winged geese on their migration path flew in perfect V-formation about fifty metres away. Caught on a warm thermal, their wings barely moved, the only movement the graceful undulation of their necks. Totally entranced, I stared until my eyes watered, until my smile threatened to split my face.

When Jasper alerted me that he was changing direction, I felt a moment's sadness, then intense joy that I'd experienced this once-in-a-lifetime moment. My heart slamming against my chest, I wondered if that was a harbinger of my relationship with Jasper. Was he destined to blaze through my life like a comet, then fade away once this trip was over? Because really, once the last few teething issues in our contract were ironed out, there would be no need for further day-to-day contact.

And as we glided towards our designated landing spot, the ground rushing up at us, my breath was snatched from my lungs. Because I knew the seventy-minute flight would've been right up there with the most intensely exhilarating thing I'd ever done had I not felt another thunderbolt of emotion the moment we stepped back onto terra firma.

Despite suspecting this was coming, I stood shell-shocked and completely willing for Jasper to believe, as he laughingly loosened my harness and pulled it off, that it was the flight that held me tongue-tied. While all the time, the sonic boom of revelation ripped my life apart.

I was in love with Jasper Mortimer.

I struggled to hold myself together as he trailed a finger down my cheek, his eyes caressing my face. 'You should feel this free every day, Wren. Let the baggage go. It suits you.'

I must have given a satisfactory response, because his teeth flashed in another devastating smile before he took my hand and walked me back to our SUV.

In the car, I grabbed my laptop and attempted to make notes about the experience, even though my focus was shot to pieces. Thankfully, it kept Jasper from engaging me in conversation, gave me the reprieve to contain the uncontainable.

My heart had handed itself over to my family's worst enemy and I knew deep in my bones that it was irretrievable. Did I even want it back? In a different world, had there been a chance with Jasper, would I have taken it? While my soul wanted to scream yes, my head forced me to face reality.

We'd gone from regular sex sessions for the sake of peaceful contract negotiations to a week in a desert paradise already counting down to its conclusion.

None of it reeked of permanence or commitment. And even if it did, did either of us have the tools to sustain it in the long term?

Shaken by the glimpse of the desolate future that awaited me, I was relieved when, on arriving at the resort, Jasper was handed a note that made him frown.

‘I need to make a call to London.’

The tightness in his voice temporarily prised me from my inner turmoil. ‘Is everything all right?’

His lips firmed. ‘It’s Gemma. She’s been trying to reach me. So has my aunt.’ He anticipated my next question with a shake of his head. ‘I can’t tell you why because I have no idea.’ When he raised his gaze from the note, I caught a glimpse of apprehension.

‘Go deal with it. I’ll be fine.’

He gave a brisk nod and strode away, tension vibrating off him.

As quickly as my relief arrived, it evaporated. I was in love with Jasper. And whatever permutation I came up with showed our liaison as heart-wrenchingly temporary. My mother’s stark condemnation and Perry’s possible reaction aside, Jasper had initiated this thing between us out of frustration over my reluctance to sign on to his deal. Would we even be together otherwise?

If you want to know, ask him.

For the first time in my life, I shied away from my rational inner voice. Every inch of my soul recoiled against receiving another rejection. And yet, when the voice retreated under the relentless force of the shower I took when I returned to the suite, I

mourned its silence.

My senses were still in turmoil when Jasper stalked into the riad half an hour later. His hair stood in haphazard spikes, as if he'd repeatedly run his fingers through it.

'Is everything okay?'

'No,' he growled. 'I need to head back to London.'

My heart lurched. Was this over already?

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Dear God, I'm not ready!

The need to stop the damning words from spilling out kept my lips firmly shut as he paced to the liquor cabinet. His jaw remained set as he splashed a finger of cognac into a glass, then glanced over at me, one eyebrow raised. When I refused the silent offer of a drink, he picked his up and swallowed it in one gulp. Setting it down with suppressed force, he faced me.

‘There’s a board meeting tomorrow morning that requires my presence.’

I frowned. ‘You didn’t know it was happening?’

Granite-jawed, he answered, ‘Hell, no. But I have no intention of missing it.’

Questions crowded my brain but his forbidding demeanour dried them all up. And really, wasn’t this short, sharp shock of a break exactly what I needed?

No, my senses screamed. Take whatever you can get.

And then what? My chest squeezed painfully as desolation took hold. When Jasper crossed over to me, slid his hands into my hair, it was all I could do not to melt against him as he fused his lips to mine. To do everything my instinct warned me would only intensify the impending anguish.

‘I’m sorry, sweetheart, but this is unavoidable.’

I forced a nod. ‘It’s fine. But I think I’ll stay, make sure everything is in place before

I leave.'

He took a long moment to reply and when he did it was with a curt nod. 'Okay. I'll send the plane back for you in a couple of days. And I'll take you out to dinner when you get back to London.'

One small step, Wren. That's all it takes.

The words that fell from my lips seared my insides raw and bloody. 'No. I don't think that's a great idea.'

A frown clenched his forehead. 'Why not?' he growled.

'What are we doing, Jasper?' I blurted before I could stop myself.

To his credit he didn't give me a flippant answer. And even when his hands dropped, his gaze remained fixed on mine. 'Do we need to label it? As long as it feels good, why question it?'

'But that's the problem. How long would it feel good for?'

I was aware I was worsening the mood when his eyes shadowed. 'Wren—'

'That ride this morning? It felt exhilarating. But it ended.'

He shrugged. 'So we'll choose the next adventure. And the one after that.'

'That's all life is to you? A series of thrilling rides?' If so, how long before I was a stale experience he needed to replace with a more stimulating one?

He paced away from me. 'This is so not the time to be dealing with this, Wren.'

A part of me felt sympathy for him. Whatever reason had triggered the unscheduled board meeting, it'd rattled him. But the grounded part of me stressed this was exactly the moment to end this, before I lost even more of myself. 'Is there ever a right time?'

His eyes narrowed, my answer obviously incensing him. 'Nice try, sweetheart, attempting to slot me into some ordinary box you usually reserve for past lovers.' His phone beeped and his jaw gritted after a furious glance at it. 'I need to leave for the airport. But trust me on this...this isn't over.'

'Isn't it?'

With strides powered by frustration, he returned to me, dragged me against his body and stole another hard, tongue-stroking kiss. 'Fuck no, it isn't.'

Self-preservation insisted I didn't prolong this moment, so I pursed my lips, remained in the living room as he stalked to the bedroom. Five minutes later, his suitcase was at the door. Another kiss and he was gone.

And for the next twenty-four hours, I remained in suspended animation of heartache, anguish and mind-shredding debate as to whether I'd done the right thing.

Then it all ceased to matter as all hell broke loose.

'Let me get this straight. You called a board meeting to get us to vote for you to stage a hostile takeover of Bingham Industries?'

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I stared at the man who'd had the audacity to claim a seat at the head of the conference table. The years had turned his hair white and his face weathered. But those piercing eyes and that cruel mouth were the same.

The roar in my ears was nothing compared to the tight vise around my chest. Wren would never forgive me for this. I'd left things in a precarious enough state in my rush to return to London. And taking her to Morocco would be seen by her as the perfect opportunity to get her out of the way in order for my family to stage this ambush. Hell, I'd feel the same in her shoes. Which was why I needed to end this debacle asap.

'You have balls of steel, I'll give you that,' Damian murmured from his place two seats over. Next to me, my cousin Gideon snorted and reclined deeper in his seat, his expression reeking of boredom. I knew it was deceptive because he wouldn't have attended this meeting at all if he were uninterested. But he knew what the instigator of this meeting had done to me. To my siblings. Just as I knew he was here to support me. Hell, maybe my family wasn't so dysfunctional after all.

'Big, fat ones. Trouble with big balls is, expose them like this and they're stupidly easy targets,' I tossed in.

Hugh Mortimer's gaze turned to ice, his gaze tracking his eldest son's, then Gideon's before meeting mine. With me, he lingered, as if trying to spot the weakness he'd condemned me for all those years ago.

I stared him down. Look all you like, old man. I'm immune to you now.

He blinked first, his gaze shifting to take in the other Mortimer board members. 'Have you all gone soft in my absence? Bingham is ripe for the plucking.'

'Along with a hundred or so other struggling companies. Why this one in particular?' I taunted.

'Because it's the lowest hanging fruit, that's why,' he answered, his voice booming across the room.

'So much hot temper, Hugh. Calm yourself before you suffer a stroke.' This from Aunt Flo, whose gaze threatened to turn my father into icicles.

To my left, my cousin Bryce sniggered. 'This is way more fun than the reality TV shows Savvie's addicted to,' he murmured.

I allowed searing jealousy to consume me for a moment before I shrugged it off. If I let my guard down, I'd walk away with nothing. Destroy for ever the possibility of having what Gideon, Damian and Bryce had with their new but thriving relationships. Hell, even my wild-child cousin, Graciela, had settled down and was insanely happy with her new man.

'I don't have time to sit around all day debating this. This company isn't in the habit of staging hostile takeovers. I, for one, don't intend to start now.' I glanced at Uncle Conrad, chairman of the board. 'Shall we put it to a vote?'

He glanced at my father, his expression apprehensive. 'Um...'

'I vote nay,' I snarled.

Gideon's hand barely left the armrest. 'It's afuck, nayfrom me.'

‘And from me,’ Damian growled, his eyes shooting daggers at the man who’d sired us.

I lost interest after Aunt Flo, Bryce, Gem and Graciela also sided with me. Even if the remaining board members voted against me, I’d still win.

The second the votes were counted and confirmed as fourteen to six, I rose from the table.

All my calls to Wren so far had gone to voicemail. The moment I’d discovered what my father was up to, I’d tried reaching her in Marrakesh, only to discover she’d packed her bags and left without waiting for my plane. She was probably still in the air. Or blocking my calls.

Stomach hollow at the strong possibility it was the latter, I reached for my phone again. It would be easy to check which flights had left Marrakesh—

‘Jasper, a word.’

I stiffened at my father’s voice. Damian’s eyes narrowed. But when his gaze flicked to me, I nodded. Ten seconds later, I was alone with my father for the first time in years.

He sauntered away from me, hands deep in his pockets as he looked out of the window for a full minute before turning to face me. ‘I expected you to be the loudest dissenting voice and you didn’t disappoint. Still grappling with that bleeding heart, son?’ he sneered.

The bite of his condemnation was less...sharp than I’d expected. ‘You say bleeding heart, I call it exercising good business sense. You still know what that is, don’t you? Or are you so locked on this trifling obsession you can’t see straight?’

He inhaled sharply. 'What did you say?'

'You heard me. When are you going to let this go?'

'Not for as long as I draw breath, that's for sure.'

I studied him for a handful of seconds. 'There's more to this than just business, isn't there? What really happened between you and Bingham?'

I didn't expect him to answer but, surprisingly, he responded. 'The upstart had the nerve to try to steal your mother from me.'

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Shocked laughter barked from my throat. ‘All of this because some guy made a pass at your wife?’

Volcanic rage built in his eyes. ‘He disrespected me. No one disrespects me, boy. No one.’

My humour evaporated. ‘I’m not a boy. And in case you haven’t heard, George Bingham is dead. Don’t you have better things to do than to wrestle with a ghost?’

His nostrils flared but the hard rejoinder I expected didn’t arrive. Eyes eerily similar to mine considered me for several seconds, before a hard smile twisted his lips. ‘I heard you were sleeping with her...the Bingham girl. I didn’t think you would be so dense. Obviously, I was wrong.’

‘I’d seriously watch it, old man.’

The flicker in his eyes said my warning had got through. ‘Answer me this, son. Would you let it go if someone made advances on what you considered yours?’

He clearly knew which buttons to press because the answer was hell, no. Wren was mine. She’d been mine long before that first sizzling episode in her maze. But scent-marking her was one thing. Destroying countless lives over an overblown feud was another. ‘No, I won’t,’ I answered my father. ‘But neither would I use a bulldozer to squash a gnat.’

‘Ah, ever the peacemaker, eh, son?’

A flash of pain and anger twisted inside me. Then curiously the ache eased, leaving in its place a feeling of...acceptance. Calm. Some things just weren't meant to be. 'You keep calling me son, and I really wish you'd stop.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Excuse me?'

'No, you're not excused. Stop calling me son because you haven't earned the right. You were simply a biological ingredient that helped form my existence. You made it clear your children were simply a means to an end. So do us all a favour, Hugh, and go back to wherever the hell you came from.'

I headed for the door, the urgency to get to Wren a nuclear force inside me.

'Come back here, Jasper. We're not done.'

I delivered the same corrosive smile his genes had helped me perfect and had the satisfaction of watching his eyes widen. 'Oh, yes, we are.' I turned away from him, then veered back to make the final, vital point. 'Stay away from Bingham's, too. Or so help me, I'll devote every single penny of my many billions to crushing you.'

Every second of my trip to Wren's house four harrowing days later felt like a light year. Unsurprisingly, Hugh hadn't heeded my warning. And even without the weight of the Mortimer board behind him, he managed to cause an uproar that gripped the city. Every photo I saw of Wren looking anguished as the tabloids hounded her intensified my fury. Staying away from her until I resolved this disaster had felt like death by a million cuts.

My mouth dried as I turned into her street. While my trusted spies had confirmed she was home, gaining entry was another matter.

But I couldn't give up now. Striding to her front door, I leaned on the doorbell. My

heart leapt as I heard faint steps and her voice ending a phone call.

Then, 'Fuck off, Jasper.'

'No, sweetheart. I'm not leaving.'

The door burst open. 'Who the hell do you think you are, coming here like this?'

'Let me in, Wren. Please.'

'Are you deaf? I said fuck off.'

God, she looked glorious. Fierce pride elevated her chin even as pain clouded her beautiful eyes. Unable to heed her request, I simply shook my head. 'No.'

Her face twisted as she tried to hang on to her composure. 'You cut me off. Wouldn't even take my calls. Now, my lawyers tell me I'm all out of options and I have forty-eight hours to accept your terms. So, I guess you've come to gloat?'

'No, I haven't. And I'm not the one threatening you. It's my father.'

She paled, her hand dropping from the door. 'What?'

'Let me in and I'll explain.'

Numbly, she stepped back, then flinched from me as I turned to her.

Gritting my teeth, I went down the hallway into her living room, relieved when she followed. Since there was no point beating about the bush, I launched into explanation. 'I didn't answer you because I was dealing with my father. The board backed me against him, Wren. Our contract is airtight. As for that farce of a takeover,

it'll happen over my dead body.'

Her jaw sagged open. 'What are you saying?'

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‘I’m saying that before end of business today, the threat to your company will be over. And before I’m finished with him, Hugh will know that his lastborn son isn’t weak. That like I’ve always done, I’ll fight for those who matter to me. To the death if I have to.’

Her eyes grew into alluring saucers and I wanted to grab her, wrap her tight in my arms and never let go. But we’d been through the mill the last few days. I knew it would take more than a few declarations to make things right. Plus I had a feeling that, while I might have won this skirmish with my father, he would continue to be a nuisance for a while.

As those thoughts flashed through my head, the light died from her eyes. ‘It’s too late, Jasper. The Bingham board are seriously thinking of selling—’

‘Fuck that. You won’t be selling Bingham’s. Not to someone who’ll break it into little pieces and sell it, and certainly not to my father.’

Her chin went higher. ‘It’s not up to you, though, is it?’

I tried a different tack. ‘Did I tell you Damian is married now?’

She frowned. ‘What?’

I shook my head, the very thought still bewildering in the extreme. ‘My hard-hearted, closed-off brother, whose only friend in the world is my certifiably psychotic cousin Gideon, is in love. With an actual red-blooded woman. Who apparently loves him back.’

Her confusion grew. 'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because he's proof that the unthinkable can happen. And they're not just in love, they're also in business together.'

'That's great, but were they locked in a family feud before they got together?'

'No, but fuck that, too,' I snarled. 'Tell me you don't want this to end, once and for all, Wren. That we haven't paid enough for the wrong decisions our parents made?'

She swallowed and that small hesitation sparked hope in my chest. Her gaze flicked to the phone she'd tossed onto the coffee table, and my instinct latched on to it.

'Who were you talking to just now?'

Her lips pursed for a second. 'Perry. Apparently he's allowed phone calls after the first four weeks.'

'What did you talk about?' I pushed, that blind hope still building.

She slicked her tongue over her bottom lip. 'He said he didn't hate me for sealing the deal with you. Or...for going out with you.' The relief in her voice was palpable.

'Good. What else?'

'He said he would support me in whatever decision I make about the company. And...'

'And what?'

'He knows he was the favourite child, that I got a raw deal when it came to our

parents' love. He wants me to forgive him for taking advantage of it.'

'As he should.' I paused for a heartbeat before speaking the words that blazed from my soul. 'While you're giving your brother a chance, would you consider giving me one, too?'

Panic flared over her face before her gaze swept away. 'I told you, I'm not some lost cause you need to save. You can go ahead and bid for Bingham's if you want but I—'

'I love you. Does that count?'

Her jaw dropped and a visible tremble shook her body. 'What?'

'I love you, Wren. And you're far, far from a lost cause. You're fit to command armies and your indomitable spirit makes me fall harder for you every passing second.'

She inhaled. Right before her eyes narrowed into accusing slits. 'You refused to take my calls. You left me floundering in the dark for days, Jasper!'

'Because I was scrambling to stop Hugh from getting his hands on Bingham's. Between Gideon, Damian and I, we've been up round the clock for days, blocking every conceivable avenue Hugh might exploit.'

Several layers of anger drained away. 'You...have?'

'If it was just a question of money, it would've been easy. Between the three of us, we have enough to stop Hugh financially. But before you got your lawyers to implement the freeze on the votes, he was busy trying to buy off your board members. And I was busy trying to put this together.'

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Her gaze dropped to the document I held out. 'What is that?'

'A solution I'd love for you to consider when we're done taking care of what's more important. I love you, Wren,' I reiterated. Because I needed her to hear it. To know that the powerful emotion that had taken root inside me when I wasn't looking and fused itself to my very soul wasn't going away. 'I think I fell in love with you five years ago, at the intern's seminar.'

Green eyes grew shiny and I dared to go closer, to hope for an echo of what I felt. 'I don't... I can't...'

'Sweetheart, be brave. One last time. Let's defy the odds and shove our happiness in the faces of our doubters.'

A shocked gasp left her lips. 'Perry said something just like that.'

'And I'd kick his arse for stealing my thunder if I didn't wish with every fibre in my being that you would consider it.' Unable to bear being apart from her, I stepped closer, cupped her chin and nudged her gaze to mine. 'Please, Wren. You mean everything to me. I want to build a life with you. I want to see that smile every day, wait with bated breath for you to blow me away with your brilliant mind. And, sweet heaven, I want the privilege of fucking you every chance I get, even if some of those include you and a certain trench coat I've decided can stay. For now.'

Her laugh was music to my ears and manna to my soul. Too soon, it died away. 'Are you sure, Jasper? This upheaval...it feels like a lot.'

I nodded. 'I get it, and there will probably be a few more to come. But would you rather face it alone or with a seriously handsome dude who worships you?'

Again that smile threatened to make an appearance.

'Take the step,' I pleaded.

Her breath caught and her hand rose as if to touch me. I held my own breath until she did. Then I tugged her into my arms, groaning as my lips found hers. But far too soon, she pulled away.

'Wait. Tell me you didn't know what was happening when you left Morocco.'

I grimaced. 'All Gemma would tell me was that I was needed at the board meeting. I think she suspected I wouldn't attend if she told me Hugh was the one behind it. I didn't know, sweetheart. It killed me the way you found out. But hopefully, I can make it up to you.'

She glanced at the document, then her gaze returned to mine. 'I was terrified you'd betrayed me, Jasper.'

'Never. For as long as I live, I'll never let you down that way. Or in any other way. You're mine. I fight for what's mine. And you are right at the top of that list.'

Tears filled her eyes and neither of us cared when they drenched her cheeks. Because she was smiling through them, her arms encircling my neck. After another long, soul-stirring kiss, she whispered in my ear, 'Do you want to know when I fell in love with you?'

The electric shock that went through me held me rigid. Then, pure happiness blazing through me, I said, 'Yes, I do.'

‘When you took me into the sky with the promise to be the wind beneath my wings and laid the world at my feet.’

A knot in my throat hoarsened my words. ‘You have my promise that I will do that for you every day, Wren.’

Fresh tears filled her eyes but she looked more beautiful than ever. ‘Only if you let me do the same for you.’

‘Deal.’

We kissed, long and deep and soul-sealing. ‘I love you, Jasper.’

‘My heart and soul and trust and body are yours. And if you can squeeze in a wedding before the launch, I swear to you that I’ll find another fraction of love for you.’

Her laughter branded my soul and I vowed to wear it with pride. Because I was Wren’s and she was mine.

‘Challenge accepted.’

EPILOGUE

THERE WERE MOMENTS in the past three months when I was a little bit ashamed of the precious time I’d wasted fighting this feeling even though I recognised things had played out the way they were supposed to.

That pain and desolation made this all-encompassing bliss suffusing me now even more precious.

‘You’re smiling again, Wren. I swear if you don’t get your act together, you’ll blow this for me.’

‘Sorry.’ I laughed at my almost sister-in-law’s mournful voice. ‘I can’t help it.’

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:57 am

Gemma Mortimer approached, tweaking the veil she'd tweaked a dozen times already. 'I know, but maybe just...pretend for five seconds? I really want to see Jasper's face.'

'Why?'

Gemma shrugged. 'Just...a little payback for all the tricks he pulled on me when we were kids.'

The woman who was fast becoming as precious to me as her brother stared at me with pleading eyes. Damn, those irresistible hazel Mortimer eyes. 'Three seconds, that's all I can give you.'

Gemma whooped. 'I knew you were awesome when you chose me as your maid of honour.'

My smile widened, my heart swelling at the closeness between the siblings these past few months. But my heart was even more grateful for the transformation within my own family.

As if summoned by my thoughts, my mother walked in as Gemma retreated.

Agnes wore a burnished orange lace dress that perfectly complemented the tan she'd cultivated in the pre-wedding week we'd been in Morocco. But her attire wasn't what interested me. The tentative smile that grew at my silent welcome was what touched my soul, the light kiss she dropped on my cheek before stepping back what drew tears to my eyes.

An open conversation with her on my return to London, and then with Perry after his successful stretch at rehab, had stopped the rot of our relationship. Full recovery was a long way off, but my mother's raw admission that she didn't want to lose her daughter, that she'd taken a wrong stance in order to please my father, had helped.

'You look beautiful, Wren.'

'Thank you, Mother.'

She stepped closer. 'I hope this doesn't make you cry and ruin your make-up, but thank you for healing our family.'

Swivelling to face her, I felt a small sob burst out of me. 'Oh, Mum!'

Her own eyes watered. 'You've never called me that before. I... I like it.'

I gripped her hand as she sniffed. Then after touching up my make-up, she looked into my eyes. 'Your brother is ready to walk you down the aisle. Are you ready, Wren?'

'The love of my life is waiting for me, Mum. I'm ready.'

I watched the woman twirling expertly on the dance floor, drawing smiles and laughter from family and guests alike. Silently I shook my head in wonder as she caught my gaze and blew me a kiss.

My wife. Wren Mortimer-Bingham was my wife.

'Jesus, don't let her catch you with that idiotic smile on your face, Jasper. She'll own you for life.'

‘Don’t listen to Gideon,’ came the rejoinder from Damian. ‘I catch him staring at Leonie like that at least a dozen times a minute.’

I mourned the disruption of my adoration and turned as Bryce joined us. ‘Yeah, I say don’t watch her like that because it creeps the rest of us out.’

I couldn’t help the laughter that barked out of me or the now familiar warmth that infused me. I’d come to recognise it as a different kind of love. The sustaining kind that was always there but buried beneath the clutter of other emotions.

All it’d needed was the right woman to help us all buff off the hardened edges to rediscover the diamond-strong connection beneath.

And, sweet heaven, the shine of their love was blinding. For a silent moment we watched the women in our lives—Wren, Leonie, Neve and Savvie—dance some more.

‘Are you ready to talk business or shall we wait for this sappiness to pass?’ Damian muttered.

My gaze flicked from my brother to his wife, Neve, who looked up just then and sent him a secret smile. Then I gazed at my own wife. ‘Don’t hold your breath, Damian. This is a lifelong thing,’ I replied.

He turned and watched me for a second. Then slapped me on the back. ‘I’m proud of you, brother.’

The lump was still in my throat when I wove through the guests to my wife’s side. Wrapped my arms around her, held her tight and just breathed her in as she threw her arms around my neck.

‘I missed you,’ I confessed. ‘And I love you like mad, even though I still owe you big time letting Gem pull that prank at the wedding.’

Gemma had suddenly frozen halfway down the aisle, stared at me and mouthed Sorry. A heartless trick that’d nearly killed me until Wren stepped into view on her brother’s arm, her smile incandescent.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:57 am

Wren threw back her head and laughed now, and I shamelessly buried my face in her neck, basked in her joy and beauty.

‘And how are you going to punish the love of your life?’

I kissed her long and deep, uncaring of who saw us. ‘I’ll come up with something, I’m sure. Right now, I’m a little stumped since you’ve blown me away with the success of this launch and I’m scrambling to see past your genius.’ All around us, A-listers enjoyed the buzz and celebration of the opening of Mortimer Marrakesh. And according to the data, we were fully booked for several months.

Wren’s fingers brushed my cheek, her eyes shining with love. ‘You’re the genius. For urging me to take this wild ride with you. I love you, Jasper. So much.’

‘Are you glad we joined forces?’ The document I’d brought to her flat had been a merger proposal between Bingham and the Mortimer Group. Her agreement had stopped Hugh in his tracks. He’d left London soon after and I didn’t miss him one little bit.

‘Absolutely ecstatic. I couldn’t be happier. With you. With our life. With our partnership.’

‘Hmm, but I bet I could make you a tiny bit happier...’

Her eyes sparkled. ‘Let me guess. Are you going to take me flying again?’

‘Any time you want. But for now...’ I looked over her shoulder, spotted a darkened

doorway that led to a secret place ‘... I promise a different, way better type of flying.
Come with me?’

Her smile threatened to burst my heart wide open. ‘To the ends of for ever.’