



Fergus

Author: *Carole Mortimer*

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Description: FERGUS (Wynter Hearts 3) is the third book in the NEW contemporary romance series by Amazon #1 and International Bestselling author, Carole Mortimer.

Fergus Wynter loves his life as head of the Paris branch of the family-owned company, Wynter Security. No two clients are ever the same, but it's their corporate contracts with companies worldwide that has made Fergus, his brothers, and their cousin, all billionaires.

But just because Fergus enjoys working behind a desk now doesn't mean he isn't fully aware that someone has been stalking him for the past three days.

Thea Morgan has only met Fergus Wynter once before, and it was years ago, when he briefly—very briefly!—dated her mother. She has no reason to think he will remember either of them. But someone is stalking her, and she has no idea who or why, and Fergus is the only person she can think of who might be able to help her.

But to meet him again she'll need to become the one doing the stalking!

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CHAPTER ONE

Fergus knew someone was following him.

Correction: it would be more accurate to say he knew exactly who was following him. A young woman. The same young woman who had been dogging him every time he had stepped out in public for the past two days.

Oh, she thought she'd been clever, staying out of sight whenever he chanced to glance in her direction. But what she hadn't realized was that Fergus was using the windows of the shops he passed or paused in front of to also observe what was behind and to either side of him.

He'd seen the same young woman too many times in that reflection the past two days for it to be a coincidence. What she probably didn't know was that Fergus was just as guilty of watching every chance he got.

Because from the moment he'd first seen it, he'd decided she had the singularly most delectable and bitable arse he had ever had the pleasure of looking at.

Those twin globes were both small and pert, and Fergus instinctively knew they would fit perfectly in the palms of his hands. The more he looked at them, the more he wanted to squeeze and caress, to bite them.

He had always thought of himself as a leg man. He liked and enjoyed a woman's breasts, as he did all parts of a woman's body, but he'd always loved having a pair of long legs draped over his shoulders or wrapped about his waist as he licked and

sucked a woman's clit to orgasm or thrust inside her with the same result.

This woman's lack of height meant that although her legs were slender, they weren't long. Her breasts were small too. But that arse...

Fuck, he was getting hard just thinking about baring and taking his time pleasuring it!

What held him back from introducing himself was the fact he had no idea why she had been following him for the past two days.

To double-check that he wasn't being suspicious about someone newly moved to Paris who just happened to be developing the same routine as him—leaving his house at eight o'clock to go to his office at Wynter Security, leaving the office building at ten o'clock to stroll to his favorite coffee shop on the Champs-Élysées, sitting down to enjoy coffee and a croissant and people watch before strolling back to his office, and the same again at lunchtime—this morning, Fergus had left his house at the normal time but waited until ten thirty and then taken a different route to the coffee shop.

Within seconds, he had spotted the woman's reflection behind him in half a dozen store windows.

Even now, he could see her loitering at a bus stop a few yards away, supposedly waiting for a bus and checking information on her cell phone. So far, two buses had stopped to drop off and pick up passengers, and she hadn't made any attempt to get onto either of them before they pulled away.

She was extremely beautiful in a pale and ethereally slender way. As far as he could see, she wore little makeup. Her eyes were light in color, but she hadn't ever been close enough for Fergus to tell exactly what that color was. Her nose was small and snub, her lips full and bow-shaped. Her straight, light brown, shoulder-length hair

revealed red highlights in the sunshine.

She was thin in that way so many other women envied, because she could wear anything and look amazing in it. Even the fitted denims and T-shirts she had been wearing the past couple of days looked elegant on her.

It was because her jeans and T-shirts fit her so well that Fergus could clearly see that the only thing she had in the back pocket of her jeans was a cell phone in a case that probably also housed her credit cards and cash. Nor did she carry a shoulder bag or backpack in which she might have also stored a weapon. If she had, Fergus would have put an end to what he considered her stalkerish behavior on the first day he'd noticed her.

But he'd had enough now. It was past time for this shit to stop.

Fergus threw several euros onto the table to pay for his coffee and croissant, plus the added tip, before walking straight toward her.

* * *

Thea's eyes widened in alarm as she realized, after days of keeping her distance, deliberately arranging for it to be that way, Fergus Wynter was now heading purposefully in her direction.

No, she must be mistaken. He?—

She wasn't.

Nor was she imagining that his eyes, those deep and mesmerizing emerald-green orbs, were totally focused on her. So much so that he almost plowed down a young couple who got in his way, his apology for doing so distracted at best as he kept his

gaze fixed on his goal.

There was now no denying Thea was that goal.

She tried to move, to get away before Fergus reached her. But her feet seemed to weigh a ton each and had rooted themselves to the pavement, making it impossible for her to go anywhere.

She heard the sound of the brakes of another bus as it pulled into the stop behind her, followed by the whoosh of the doors opening. A glance back revealed a single person stepping off the bus, but there was no one getting on it. Would she be able to get on board before?—

“Don’t even think about it,” Fergus Wynter grated as his hand curled about the top of her arm, just tight enough to keep her in place but not to hurt her. “You aren’t going anywhere until you’ve explained exactly why you’ve been following me for the past two days and...approximately three hours?” he added after a glance at the watch on his wrist, which Thea knew had cost as much as some people’s houses.

It was alarming to be told he was aware of exactly how long Thea had been following him.

She’d done her homework and had already known where Fergus now lived and worked in Paris, and where the Wynter Security offices were situated. But she had needed to know more about him than that before she attempted to speak to him. Before she dared trust him.

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Because at the moment, she was afraid to trust anyone.

Thea knew that the normal thing to do would have been to telephone the Paris offices of Wynter Security and make an appointment to see Fergus. The problem with that was Thea hadn't been sure, once Fergus heard her name, if he would refuse to see her and cancel the appointment.

If Fergus was still the same honest and trustworthy man he'd been ten years ago, then Thea needed him not to refuse to see or speak to her simply because of her name and what that represented to him.

That first morning, she'd been standing outside the house he lived in in Paris's 7th arrondissement—the wealthiest and most exclusive area in the city, of course—when he stepped through the security gates enclosing the property shortly after eight o'clock.

She'd followed discreetly as he chose to walk to the building on the Champs-Élysées, where the offices of Wynter Security were situated. She'd done the same when he left midmorning to go to the coffee shop, and again when he went for lunch at one of Paris's most elite restaurants. At the end of his working day, she'd then followed him back to his home.

She'd been a little surprised when he didn't leave his house again until the following morning. She'd imagined he would be out every evening enjoying the Parisian nightlife. Or possibly spending the night at a woman's apartment.

But on both nights, Fergus hadn't gone out again after returning from the Wynter

Security offices. At least, he hadn't done so before Thea had left at ten o'clock to go back to her hotel and order some food from room service before falling into bed.

After two days of watching his every move, Thea believed she had established that Fergus was well-liked by the locals, whom he greeted by name and who greeted him back with the same familiarity and warmth. The staff in the offices at Wynter Security, three women and two men, all seemed happy enough to be working for and with him based on the chatter Thea overheard between them on their way in and out of the building. As did the steady stream of clients who had called on him during those same two days.

At no time had Fergus given any indication that he knew Thea was following him. Which was why she was totally unprepared to have him confront her in the way he was now doing.

Revealing that he had known all along she'd been following him?

Knowing of his history, both in the military Special Forces and at Wynter Security, Thea realized she had been naive to think he wouldn't have noticed her sometime during the past two days and grown suspicious about her presence. Now that she thought about it logically, she was surprised he had waited this long before confronting her.

The grip he had on her arm and his determined expression didn't give the impression he intended letting her go again until she had explained herself. Even the bus had now closed its door and pulled away.

"Do I know you?" he now questioned guardedly, narrowed gaze sweeping over her in assessment.

And so it began!

“Not exactly.” Thea gave him a less-than-reassuring smile. “My name is Thea. We met once, briefly, ten years ago,” she revealed with a wince.

“I don’t recall—” He tensed as he abruptly ceased speaking, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Did you say Thea? As in TheaMorgan?”

Thea stared at him with wide eyes, too surprised he had remembered her and her surname so quickly to be able to do anything else. “How on earth did you realize that’s who I am just from the name Thea?” she finally managed to ask.

He shrugged. “You’re the only person I’ve ever met who has that name.”

They really had met only once and briefly. Thea had been fourteen at the time and, to her mind, totally forgettable, with her mousy brown hair, braces on her teeth, and plagued still with puppy fat.

Nowadays, she regularly had red highlights put into her styled shoulder-length hair. The braces on her teeth had done their job, and her teeth were now perfectly straight. The puppy fat had long since disappeared, leaving her too slim, if anything. She certainly had no luscious curves with which to tempt a man.

As Martin, her last boyfriend, had taken great delight in telling her when they broke up shortly before her mother’s death four months ago.

She had ignored Martin’s attempts to come back into her life since then. Because she’d known, considering her curves hadn’t changed in the slightest since he’d described her arse as being “too damned skinny” for his taste, that his interest must now be in the money she had inherited from her mother after their breakup, rather than a sudden realization he was in love with her after all.

Naively, at first, she had believed his sympathy over her mother’s death and his regret

over their breakup to be genuine. But Thea had very quickly realized from his conversation about what he envisaged their future together being—instant retirement for him, a large house in London, servants, luxury holidays—that his interest was only in the money her mother had left her rather than in Thea herself.

Needless to say, Thea hadn't taken a single one of Martin's calls or answered any of his texts once she had realized what his real motive was in wanting her back.

More importantly to the situation right now, she looked nothing like that awkward fourteen-year-old Fergus had met ten years ago when he briefly dated her mother, so how the hell had he recognized her so easily?

She, of course, would have recognized him in a crowded room full of other attractive men aged in their early forties.

Because Fergus had always been so much more than that.

Oh, he looked very Parisian now, elegant and sophisticated, in his perfectly tailored suit and snowy white shirt with a pale green silk tie. His overlong dark hair with distinguished gray strands running through it was artfully cut into that careless style that looked as if he had just climbed out of bed and run a hand through that dark thickness before getting on with his day.

But those bespoke clothes and expensive hairstyle in no way disguised the edge of danger that had always surrounded Fergus like a second skin and was probably one of the reasons he had appealed to her mother.

Jessica had always been drawn to dangerous men. Ones with hard but arrestingly handsome features. In Fergus's case, those features were piercing green eyes, a sharp blade of a nose, and sensuously sculpted lips above a square jaw.

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Up close and personal like this, Thea couldn't deny the effect those harsh good looks were having on her own equilibrium. Not only was Fergus the most gorgeous man she had ever seen, but the aroma of his aftershave, something citrus combined with a male musk, warmed and aroused her senses in a way she could never remember happening before with any other man.

There was also that edge of danger which was never far from the surface. She had discovered the reason for that edge when she did her research on Fergus before coming to Paris.

He hadn't always run a security business with his two brothers and cousin, and the years Fergus had been a part of the British Special Forces had obviously hardened and honed that edge of danger.

Thea hadn't been able to find out anything more than that, because the information was classified. But she did know that soldiers drafted into the Special Forces were the elite, with a skillset far superior to that of a regular soldier. Fergus had only been twenty-two at the time, so his skills had to have been extreme in nature.

She also knew Fergus had been active on behalf of the family-owned company for the first five years after its conception. Until the company became so big that the three older members of the Wynter family had taken over as heads of the London, Paris, and New York offices. Fergus's younger brother, Linus Wynter, was the tech expert, and he tended to live and work wherever he was most wanted. Currently, that appeared to be in London.

For the past twelve years, Fergus had sat behind a desk in the Paris office and

instructed the many employees of Wynter Security on their next security assignment, rather than going out into the field himself.

But it was obvious just from looking at him and feeling the coiled tension in his body, seeing his muscular arms and chest up close, and the hard glitter of his eyes as he glared at her, that he had kept his body and himself ready for a battle, if it became necessary.

Thea hoped he wouldn't consider it necessary in regard to her. She really had come in peace. She already felt as if she was fighting an uphill battle at home against both seen and unseen threats. She didn't want Fergus to become her enemy too.

Unless, as she was her mother's daughter, he already was?

"Why have you been stalking me for the past two days?" Fergus now demanded to know.

"I'm not... I admit to following you," she conceded when he raised challenging brows. "But I don't consider that as me stalking you."

"I think that depends on your point of view and what your intentions are," he bit out. "Or were, I should say," he added grimly. "Because you certainly aren't going to be able to carry them out now that I've been forewarned and know exactly who is stalking me, even if I have no idea why."

"I mean you no harm," Thea assured.

"As I said, that depends on your point of view and why you're here."

Thea knew his only previous knowledge of her was as the daughter of Jessica Morgan, the woman he had briefly dated. It hadn't ended well.

Thea gave an inward snort at what an understatement “hadn’t ended well” was in this case.

Her mother had, as usual, been too wrapped up in herself and her own selfish needs, while being attracted to that dangerous edge she had obviously sensed beneath Fergus’s surface charm. She had failed to realize he would never bend to a woman’s will or allow himself to be blackmailed.

Her mother had been so convinced, after meeting the handsome and wealthy Fergus Wynter, back in England for several weeks, that she had found “the man who will keep me in the life to which I wish to become accustomed, and the bonus is he lives in Paris” that she hadn’t looked any further than those surface good looks and the fact he was obviously wealthy. Their first date, at an exclusive London restaurant, had only confirmed Jessica’s decision that Fergus, whether he knew it yet or not, was going to be her second husband.

She had seemed to be just as enamored with him when she came home from their dinner together at another expensive restaurant.

Unfortunately, Thea had to call her mother on her cell phone in the middle of their third date because she was being taken to the hospital in an ambulance with suspected appendicitis. She had tried not to call the emergency services, but the pain had become so bad that she’d had no choice. The paramedics driving her to the hospital had insisted that her mother be called so that she could come to the hospital and give her permission for Thea to be operated on. Her mother had grudgingly agreed.

Which was when Fergus Wynter had learned how much Jessica had lied to him about even the fundamental things. The main ones being that she had a fourteen-year-old daughter and wasn’t aged twenty-eight, as she’d told him she was. She was actually thirty-eight and so six years older than him.

Fergus would perhaps have been able to forgive her for all those lies if he'd been in love with her. But he obviously hadn't been, and once he knew the truth, he had made that clear to Jessica.

If Jessica had had the good sense to leave the situation there, then perhaps Thea wouldn't now be able to clearly see the contempt in Fergus's narrowed green eyes as he looked down at her. But her mother never had known when to give up on a lost cause.

Except maybe Thea.

But that was another story.

"I was sorry to read about your mother's death," Fergus now surprised her by saying.

Thea's eyes widened. "You were?"

He shrugged. "It's always tragic when someone dies at what is socially considered too young an age."

"But not as young as you first thought, though, hmm?" she derided.

"No," he grated at this reminder of Jessica's lies.

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Thea gave a dismissive shake of her head. “I’m really not here to talk about my mother or the past.”

“Then why are you here?” he prompted huskily.

All the time they had been talking, Thea had been aware of the warmth of Fergus’s hand wrapped about her upper arm. Of how close he was standing to her. So close she could see the darker flecks of green in his eyes as she continuously breathed in that citrus and spicy male scent.

Thea was only five feet and four inches tall, and she was wearing flat Converse, which meant that Fergus towered over her by at least a foot. Those muscular shoulders and chest also dwarfed her slender frame.

He made her feel small and...vulnerable.

She really wasn’t happy about the latter emotion. Not when it was that very same feeling that was the reason she had felt compelled to seek him out in the first place.

Because for the past couple of weeks, Thea was convinced she’d had a stalker of her own.

CHAPTERTWO

“Well?” Fergus prompted seconds later in a hard voice when Thea Morgan still hadn’t answered his question.

He'd been totally surprised when, given the opportunity to have a closer look at the woman following him, and after she'd told him her name was Thea, he had instantly recognized her as the daughter of Jessica Morgan. A woman he had dated briefly ten years ago but had regretted doing so for far longer than that after she had tried to trick him into marrying her.

It wasn't just this young woman's name that had revealed her identity to him. It was her eyes too. He had never seen eyes like them, before or since that brief meeting with Thea ten years ago.

Admittedly, their meeting had occurred in far from ideal circumstances. Fergus had driven Jessica to the hospital after an urgent telephone call from her daughter interrupted their dinner together. It was the first Fergus had heard of her even having a daughter.

Nor, when they reached the hospital, had Thea been the infant he had been expecting, but a girl in her early teens.

Thea had been in obvious pain, lying on a gurney waiting to go into the operating theater once her mother had signed the consent form for her to have her appendix removed. But even shadowed with pain, the girl's gold-colored eyes had been arresting.

Her eyes were still that pure and natural gold Fergus had found so mesmerizing that evening ten years ago.

Well...pure was possibly stretching things a little, considering whose daughter Thea was and that she was now aged twenty-four.

But Fergus knew he had never seen eyes this color before or since he had looked into Thea Morgan's all those years ago.

He realized he still found her eyes beautiful.

But he now found her arse bitable as well?

His lips thinned at the realization that, yes, he now found Thea's arse eminently bitable. "I'm rapidly running out of what little patience I have left, so I advise you to start talking," he warned.

She sighed. "A lot has happened since we last met. Too much to be condensed into a couple of sentences."

He studied her for several moments before nodding in the direction of an empty bench situated ten feet away. "Let's sit over there, and you can explain exactly what those things are." He had no intention of inviting her back to his office, and his next appointment wasn't scheduled for another hour.

He had to force himself not to look at her arse as he followed her across the pavement.

Thea, obviously totally unaware of his inward struggle, waited until they were seated next to each other on the bench before continuing. "My mother remarried five years ago."

He nodded. "I saw the pictures of the wedding in the newspapers." His mouth twisted at the memory. "As soon as I knew the name of her bridegroom, the phrase 'go big or go home' came to mind," he derided.

She nodded. "Because my mother married the Russian billionaire Andrei Yegorov."

"The Russian oligarch Andrei Yegorov," he corrected dryly. "A man who, like several of his fellow countrymen, stripped Russia of its wealth thirty years ago before moving to live in the decadent West. He was also thirty years older than your mother

when she married him.” He stated the facts as he knew them. “Yegorov conveniently died three years later, no doubt leaving Jessica the majority of his ill-gotten gains. Which, in turn, I presume have now passed on to you?”

She swallowed. “All that is true except the part about the money. Andrei and my mother had a prenuptial agreement in which she would inherit a fixed sum of money if he died, and not the majority of his fortune that you’ve just assumed she did,” she explained when he raised a questioning brow. “The bulk of Andrei’s fortune went to his son, Lev Yegorov.”

“Who is just as much of a crook as his father was before him,” Fergus dismissed with disgust.

She nodded. “Since my mother died, Lev has made it clear he wants that money returned to him.”

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Fergus narrowed his eyes. “You said his father and Jessica had a prenuptial agreement.”

Thea nodded. “Which Lev threatened to legally challenge within days of my mother’s death on the basis his father was suffering from the beginnings of dementia when he signed the agreement and that his condition had noticeably worsened by the time he died.”

“Had it?”

She shrugged. “With a man like Andrei, it was hard to tell.”

His eyes narrowed. “How much money are we talking about?”

“Fifty million pounds.”

His brows rose. “And that wasn’t the majority of Yegorov’s fortune?”

“About one percent of it,” she acknowledged heavily. “I actually offered to give Lev the money back, but he’s now decided he wants more from me than that.”

Fergus’s eyes narrowed on the increased pallor of her cheeks. “Such as?”

She released a heavy sigh. “He says the money can be returned to him as some sort of dowry when the two of us marry.”

Fergus glanced at her ringless left hand. A hand, he noted with self-derisive

admiration, that was as slender and graceful as the rest of her. “I don’t see an engagement ring?”

“Because I have no intention of becoming Lev’s fourth wife!” She gave him an exasperated glare. “He’s the one saying I’m going to be his wife. I wouldn’t willingly marry him if he was the last man on earth.”

“Isn’t that denial a little overkill?” Fergus mocked. “After all, you’ve just said the man is a billionaire.”

She snorted. “Have you met Lev?”

“I try to avoid being in the same vicinity as Russian gangsters.” Which, Fergus immediately realized, wasn’t completely true.

Because he and the rest of his family were now friends with Nikolai Volkov, the man who was second to the pakhan of the London bratva.

Nikolai had been instrumental in reuniting Fergus’s cousin Rufus with his daughter, whom they had all thought had been killed in a car accident with her mother when she was a baby. For years, Rufus and the rest of the Wynter family had all believed Emily to be forever lost to them.

The truth of that situation was far more convoluted than that, but the only thing that really mattered was that Rufus had his fully grown-up daughter returned to him. Nikolai Volkov and his wife, Daisy, were now godparents to Rufus’s granddaughter, Lily.

As a consequence, the rest of the Wynter family were now also acquainted with Daisy and Nikolai.

The cold and lethal Russian was known and feared as the Wolf in his home country and by the rest of the world. His lack of mercy when dealing with his enemies said he more than lived up to that name.

But if Nikolai decided he liked you and became your friend, and he seemed to have decided he liked and wanted to be a friend of the Wynter family, then he became your ally for life.

Thea glared impatiently at his dismissive answer. “Lev is almost sixty and for years has overindulged in vodka and donuts.” She grimaced when Fergus smiled. “Yes, I’m aware it’s a strange combination, but apparently, he’s always liked Russian vodka, and he discovered his liking for donuts after moving to the States when he left Russia with his father thirty years ago. Andrei moved to England fifteen years ago. Lev didn’t move here until after his father died.”

“When you were twenty-two?”

“That would be correct.”

“And he was already in his midfifties?”

“Yes.”

“And now the two of you are going to be married?”

She gave an obviously impatient shake of her head. “Will you please at least give me the courtesy of listening to what I’m telling you?”

“But you said?—”

“What I said was I wouldn’t willingly marry him.”

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Fergus stilled. “Yegorov is forcing you to marry him?”

She shrugged. “He hasn’t gone that far yet, but I’m sure he’ll get around to it eventually. He isn’t known for accepting the word no, any more than his father was.” She gave a shudder. “The first time Lev asked me to marry him was at my mother’s funeral four months ago. I refused.”

“Before or after you offered to give him the fifty million pounds back?”

“Both! Knowing where it came from, I’m never going to touch a penny of it anyway, so he might as well have it.”

Fergus inwardly acknowledged that attitude was the total opposite of Thea’s money-grasping mother.

Jessica had been determined to marry a man she knew had money. The fact that she had eventually married Andrei Yegorov showed she had no scruples about how and where he had acquired that wealth.

Fergus knew that Jessica’s first husband, Thea’s father, had worked on an oil rig in the North Sea. But he had been killed in a freak accident six years before Fergus and Jessica met. He knew that she had survived after her husband died by living on the generous insurance payment she had received from the company he had worked for. But by the time Fergus met her, that money must have been dwindling, and she was on the hunt for a rich husband.

Unfortunately for her, Fergus hadn’t been looking for a wife, let alone a fourteen-

year-old stepdaughter.

Thea frowned. “Lev has asked me to marry him several more times since then, and he’s always calling round to my apartment uninvited. He seems utterly convinced that I’ll eventually accept his marriage proposal,” she recalled with a disgusted wrinkling of her nose.

Fergus shrugged. “Maybe you’ll change your?—”

“Don’t even say it,” she warned vehemently. “I wouldn’t marry Lev if we were the last two people on the planet.”

Fergus snorted. “I can’t see too many women turning down his wealth. Despite his liking for vodka and donuts.”

“Well, this one did and will continue to do so.” Frustrated tears glistened in her eyes. “I am not my mother, Fergus.”

He was slowly beginning to accept that. Slowly. Because Jessica Morgan really had done a number on him all those years ago. “Lev Yegorov can’t force you to marry him. Nor am I clear on what you think I can do to help you with this situation.”

She drew in a deep breath. “I’m not here because of Lev. At least, I don’t think I am.” Her frown was pained.

“Explain.”

“Someone has been following me for the past couple of weeks. Stalking me,” she revealed.

“Perhaps Lev just employed a bodyguard to protect his future wife?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I have no intention of marrying him?” she snapped in annoyance.

“Well, he obviously hasn’t accepted your refusal as final if he keeps asking. A bodyguard he hired would have to follow you to be able to protect you. Besides, you’ve been following me the last two days,” he reminded. “And you’ve already said you don’t consider yourself to be a stalker.”

She sighed. “I’ve explained why I did that.”

“Because you weren’t sure I would even agree to see you, let alone hear you out.” She was probably right to have made that assumption, Fergus inwardly conceded. The name Morgan did not conjure up good memories for him. Far from it.

“My stalker isn’t a bodyguard hired by Lev,” she insisted.

“Tell me why you think that?”

“If it had only been that feeling of being followed, I probably wouldn’t think it at all, but when I came home from work one day last week?—”

“You inherited fifty million pounds four months ago and you still work?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re a billionaire and you still work.”

“Touché.” Fergus didn’t bother asking how she knew how much money he had.

He already knew, from this conversation alone, that Thea Morgan wasn’t just beautiful, she was intelligent and resourceful too. Far more so than her mother had been. Although, he was intrigued by the fact that Thea was still working, despite having recently inherited a fortune. Surely most people her age would have gone

traveling for a while, if nothing else?

“Anyway,” Thea continued. “The moment I entered my apartment that day, and despite the fact the door was still locked, I knew that someone had been inside. A glance into my bedroom confirmed that suspicion when it was obvious someone had been lying on my bed and not only hadn’t bothered to straighten it again but had taken my favorite pillow with them when they left.”

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“You have a favorite pillow?” Fergus repeated incredulously.

He’d slept in some pretty shitty places during the years he spent in the military, when having any sort of pillow would have been a luxury. A pillow was a pillow as far as Fergus was concerned.

Tell that to your luxury bedding and bamboo pillows the French designer told you “you simply must have” when you redecorated the house in Paris two years ago!

“You’re missing the point,” Thea snapped in irritation.

“Which is?” Fergus knew exactly what the point was. He just enjoyed watching the flare of angry color in Thea’s cheeks. Partly because it was better than the pallor, but mainly because it enhanced the pure gold of her eyes.

“That someone broke into my apartment and then lay down on the same bed where I sleep every night!” She looked ill just from talking about it.

“Then took your favorite pillow when they left,” Fergus stated evenly.

Her eyes narrowed to golden slits. “Could you stop focusing on the pillow and concentrate on the fact that someone broke into my apartment? It’s creeping me the hell out. The money and Lev’s insistence that I marry him are making it difficult for me to know who I can trust. Which is why I decided I not only needed to talk to an expert about my personal security, but also someone who I know can’t be bought or coerced by Lev.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Lucky, lucky me! I’m sorry.” He held up a placating hand when she looked ready to explode into anger again. “But there are lots of capable security companies in London you could have consulted with. My cousin Rufus’s son-in-law is a member of the family-owned Kingston Security. Rufus and Magnus are both now based at the London offices of Wynter Security, and I’m sure either of them would have been happy to talk to you.” Rufus and Magnus were both a lot mellower since they married.

Thea shook her head. “I don’t know or trust your brother, cousin, or his son-in-law.”

“You don’t know or trust me either.”

“I might not know you, but I trust you.”

He gave a derisive huff. “I can’t imagine why you would.”

“Because everything I found out about you says you’re a decent and honest man. I believe that to be true because, despite deep provocation for you to behave otherwise, you were never less than a gentleman toward my mother and her machinations.”

He snorted. “And that’s your criteria for classing me as being trustworthy and a decent and honest man?”

That color stained her cheeks again. “Yes.” She sighed. “The money... Inheriting that money from my mother, Andrei’s money, even though I have no intention of ever spending any of it, makes it difficult to know who I can trust and who just wants to use me because they think I’m wealthy.”

“Because you are.”

“Only on paper. I told you, as soon as I can convince Lev he’s wasting his time trying to force me into marrying him, he’s going to accept the money back so fast, I’ll probably get whiplash.”

Fergus narrowed his eyes. “Are you referring to anyone in particular when you say people want to be with you because of the money?”

She seemed to hesitate for a second or two before giving a shake of her head. “No, I just... It’s difficult to explain, but my life no longer feels like my own with all that money sitting in a bank account with my name on it. I feel...wrong-footed, self-conscious that everyone knows about it. It’s making me suspicious of everyone and what their motives might be for wanting to know me. Yes, I know the name for that is paranoia, and that it could also account for me thinking I have a stalker,” she added self-derisively when he gave her a pointed glance. “I put it down to that too at first, but the break-in at my apartment and the...theft,” she said carefully, “told me I’m not imagining things.”

Fergus still wasn’t sure what he thought about all this. “Was your mother and Yegorov’s marriage a happy one?”

“I don’t think so, no,” she answered cagily.

“Because Andrei Yegorov wasn’t a nice man.”

“No.”

“Was he nice to your mother?”

“I...don’t believe so.”

“You don’t think so and you don’t believe so...?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t see them enough after the marriage to be able to give an opinion.”

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“Separately or together?”

“Either.”

“Didn’t Yegorov help to pay your way through university?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He never offered, and I never asked.”

“Your mother?—”

“Never asked or offered either. I was an adult, Fergus,” she defended when she saw the disgust in his expression. “By that time, I was more than capable of looking after myself.”

“That isn’t the point?—”

“It’s the only one that matters,” Thea insisted.

Fergus had never thought Jessica was a particularly good mother, indicated by the fact that she had left Thea home alone that evening when Jessica had received the call to go to the hospital. Thea had only been fourteen at the time, too young, in Fergus’s opinion, to be left at home on her own all evening in the middle of London.

It didn't sound as if Jessica's maternal leanings had improved much after that, and from the little Thea had said, it seemed that when Jessica married Yegorov, she had mostly abandoned her maternal role altogether. Possibly because, as had been the case when she dated Fergus in the past, she hadn't wanted Andrei's friends to know she had a grown-up daughter.

"My mother and I didn't see each other often after she married Andrei," Thea said, confirming that theory. "I was already working my way through university, and I preferred to carry on paying my own way rather than asking for any financial help. I knew how Andrei came by his money, and I'm pretty sure there would have been a price to pay on my part if I'd asked for any financial help from him. My mother and I would meet for lunch on birthdays and before Christmas, but otherwise, our lives were too different. We simply had nothing in common other than what was left of our familial connection." She grimaced. "I've seen more of Lev the past four months than I saw of his father in the three years he was married to my mother."

"Because Lev wants to marry you." Fergus couldn't quite hide the distaste he felt thinking of this beautiful young woman married to that old lecher. The Yegorovs, senior and junior, were both known for their drinking and womanizing.

The thought of that lecherous old bastard touching Thea, let alone caressing and making love to the bottom Fergus now coveted, made him feel like hitting something. Preferably Yegorov.

"Lev always wants what he can't easily have." Again, Thea confirmed some of what Fergus had been thinking.

"And this time, he wants you."

"Yes."

“You would be marrying a billionaire,” he reminded.

She lifted her chin, eyes narrowed. “Exactly what are you implying?”

They both knew what he was implying!

“My name is Thea, not Jessica,” she snapped before he could answer her. “I would never use deception to try to blackmail someone into marrying me. Considering our history, I would certainly never try to do something so awful to you. Besides,” she added mockingly, “as you’ve already pointed out, I already have one billionaire who wants to marry me, so I would have no reason to use subterfuge on another one.”

Fergus scowled. “I would like to think that there are noticeable differences between myself and Lev Yegorov.” Such as their almost twenty-year difference in age. Their personalities. The fact that Fergus kept his body in trim condition and Lev looked as if he overindulged on the vodka and donuts Thea had said he did.

Fergus was aware that a part of him was judging the daughter by the mother’s actions. But knowing Jessica Morgan, however briefly, had been a mistake he and his wallet had almost paid dearly for. Was it any wonder he remained wary about her daughter’s intentions now in seeking him out?

Although that fifty million pounds Thea had inherited from her mother and her aversion to marrying the very wealthy Lev Yegorov were both pretty good indications that Thea really wasn’t a fortune hunter like her mother.

That she had continued to work, even after inheriting all that money, was also indicative of Thea’s true nature.

As was the fact she had offered to return that fifty million pounds to Lev without a marriage needing to take place. In fact, she had made it perfectly clear how much she

would prefer that it didn't.

“What kind of work do you do?” Fergus prompted curiously.

She blinked at this sudden change of subject. “I’m a teacher.”

“Of what?”

“History.”

“Impressive. I’m being serious,” he assured when Thea eyed him skeptically. “Teaching isn’t an easy profession nowadays. I’m not sure it ever was,” he dismissed wryly. “I’m guessing this is the Easter holiday if you’re still actively teaching but currently spending time in Paris?”

“Yes.”

“History was one of my favorite subjects at school,” he reminisced. “I have my degree in History and War Studies.” He’d mainly been interested in the battles and strategy used to either win or lose them.

“I know.”

Of course, she knew. He had no doubts that Thea would have made it her business to find out everything she possibly could about him before she flew to Paris to speak with him. He would have done the same in her position.

Despite his derisive reaction earlier, Fergus could admit, if only inwardly, that it was worrying that someone had broken into Thea’s apartment.

It also didn’t seem like the actions of someone Lev Yegorov would have sent to watch and guard her. Not when whoever had broken in had also made themselves comfortable on the bed Thea slept in. Fergus doubted that the lecherous and possessive-sounding Lev would have liked that at all.

Fergus wasn't sure where the theft of the pillow fit into that scenario, but its disappearance was as concerning as the rest of what Thea had told him.

The real question was whether he was willing to commit to going back to London with Thea to look into this situation more thoroughly.

Whether he was willing to test his own self-control by spending more time with her, when he knew how much he wanted to kiss and bite her delectable arse!

CHAPTER THREE

Thea could see the indecision in Fergus's expression and knew it was because, as she had suspected would be the case, he wasn't sure whether he wanted anything to do with something that would mean he had to continue to interact with a woman with the surname Morgan.

Her mother had a lot to answer for.

Not least being the way in which she had tried to trick Fergus when he didn't fall in with Jessica's plans to marry him.

What would Fergus have been like as a stepfather?

Better than Andrei, Thea would take a guess. The Russian had never been cruel or mean to her. On the contrary, she had been telling the truth when she said Andrei had basically ignored her existence after she refused his financial assistance.

She had no doubt Fergus would have made a much better stepfather.

Although Thea had to admit, the fact she now found herself attracted to him might have made that situation more than a little awkward!

How could she not be attracted to him?

Fergus was everything that encompassed tall, dark, and handsome. His age of forty-two also gave him an air of experience and sophistication. He was so handsome, with that chiseled chin, high cheekbones, and piercing green eyes, that he could have been a model on the cover of one of the romance novels Thea liked to read in her spare time. Throw in the fact he wore his elegant suits like a GQ model, and she doubted too many women would be able to resist him.

A fact Thea had noticed more than one Frenchwoman confirm as they walked past Thea and Fergus seated together on the bench.

Thea had noticed during the past couple of days that Frenchwomen, most of them elegance personified, could be very judgmental when it came to how a man looked and dressed. Fergus obviously more than passed those stringent tests.

Thea wondered what he would look like in a pair of fitted jeans and a shirt with the collar unfastened and the sleeves rolled up to just beneath his elbows.

Just as devastatingly attractive, she would guess.

But she hadn't come here to drool over how attractive Fergus now was.

"I'm staying at the George V hotel?—"

"As most millionaires do," he taunted.

Thea sighed at his obvious mockery. "It's been listed as the best hotel in Paris. As I doubt I will ever have reason to come back here again, I thought I might as well stay at the best hotel." Her chin rose. "I'm not paying for my stay with any of the fifty million pounds Andrei left my mother, if that's what you're thinking. No, that is

sitting safe and untouched in the bank, accruing interest, and it will continue to do so until Lev agrees to take it back.” She shrugged. “Apart from a weekend in Cornwall last summer, I haven’t been on holiday for years, and so I decided I had enough money saved to treat myself to a stay for a few days in the best hotel in Paris.”

She didn’t regret that decision either. The hotel was as amazing as its online hype had said it was. Her suite even had a view of the Eiffel Tower. She could also see the rest of the magnificence that was the Paris skyline out of the spacious floor-to-ceiling windows. There was even a balcony in the sitting room she could step out onto if she wanted to.

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Not that she'd spent much time in her suite or been able to go sightseeing when she was following Fergus all day and most of the evening. But she had one more full day here before she flew back to England. Now that she'd spoken to Fergus, no matter what his answer was to her request for help, she could probably see some of the sights later today and tomorrow before she left.

Her hope was that Fergus would fly back with her. Or at least agree to join her in a day or two. But she knew that would have to be his decision.

So far, it didn't look promising in her favor.

"Did your stalker follow you to Paris?"

Thea looked blankly at Fergus for several seconds before his words fully penetrated her thoughts. "I don't—I haven't noticed— Oh God!" she gasped as the idea took root. "Do you think they could have done?"

It simply hadn't occurred to her that might be the case.

Which was pretty silly of her, under the circumstances.

Fergus shrugged. "I'm merely wondering if my stalker has a stalker?"

"I'm not stalking you," she denied distractedly before reaching out to grasp Fergus's forearm. "Do you think my stalker followed me here and could be watching us right now?"

She had been so busy following and concentrating on ways to talk to Fergus that she hadn't thought to take notice of whether or not her own stalker had followed her to Paris.

Perhaps she should have?

* * *

If Thea really did have a stalker, and Fergus didn't have any reason to think she didn't—as she'd already pointed out, several times, she wasn't her mother, and it would be unfair of him to think that she was anything like Jessica—then it would be odd if they hadn't followed her to Paris too.

Fergus had become hyperaware of their surroundings and the people walking by the moment Thea told him she thought she had a stalker. So far, he hadn't identified anyone whose attention seemed to be concentrated on her in particular. A couple of men had given her lingering glances, but why wouldn't they? Thea was a beautiful young woman.

Which caused Fergus to admit he was now also hyperaware of the warmth of Thea's hand gripping his arm. A slender hand, the fingers long and graceful and, as he had noted earlier, completely bare of rings.

Which, despite her surname being Morgan, didn't mean she hadn't worn an engagement or wedding ring in the past. A lot of divorced women preferred to keep their own surname or return to it if the marriage ended.

He didn't doubt Thea's apprehension regarding the person who had broken into her apartment was real. Understandably so.

It was a violation not just of her privacy, but on an emotional and mental level an

event that must be deeply unsettling, to say the least. Which was probably the intention. Behavior like that said, Look at me, I can invade your private space any time I feel like it and take what I want.

“I haven’t noticed anyone following you,” he now assured her.

“Thank goodness.” She breathed a sigh of relief as she removed her hand and leaned back against the bench.

Fergus immediately missed the warmth of that hand. “Do you have an ex-husband or ex-live-in lover who could have let themselves into your apartment with their own key?”

She turned to look at him. “Absolutely not,” she answered firmly. “I’ve never been married or lived with anyone. Nor have I ever given a key to my apartment to anyone.”

“Not even a neighbor in case of emergency?”

“No.”

Fergus nodded, more pleased with her answers than he knew he should be.

Yes, Thea had a delectable arse, but the two of them could never become involved. Not only because of their past connection, but because Thea was eighteen years younger than him.

A fact that was becoming less and less important to him the more time he spent with her...

“Did you try calling the police after the break-in?”

“And tell them what?” Thea scoffed. “Someone’s been lying in my bed, and they took my pillow with them when they left? Sounds like the start of a fairy tale to me, so God knows how it would have sounded to the police. Look at the way you reacted when I told you!”

Fergus knew she had a point. “You’re sure nothing else was taken?”

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“Positive. The only jewelry I possess is a cameo ring my father gave me when I was seven. It has sentimental, not monetary, value and is still in its box on my dressing table. So, you see, nothing was taken but the pillow. Which, quite frankly, even I know sounds ludicrous.”

It did sound a little...lacking in substance. Fergus doubted the police would even be interested enough to send someone out to take Thea's statement, let alone check the apartment for fingerprints.

But Lev Yegorov's interest in marrying Thea, an interest she said she didn't return, was of greater concern. Especially if, as could easily have happened, Lev had arranged for someone to break into Thea's apartment. No doubt in the hope she might turn to him for protection.

Fergus had heard and read enough about Yegorov junior to know that, like his father, what he wanted, he usually got. Anyone who tried to say no to him had a habit of changing their mind or conveniently disappearing.

Lev seemed to be humoring Thea's refusals to his marriage proposal at the moment. But that didn't mean he was averse to using underhand methods, such as frightening her into depending on him, to attain his goal.

Did Fergus want to become embroiled in Thea Morgan's problems?

The answer to that was a resounding no.

Should he, as the only man she said she felt she could trust—understandably, it

seemed, after the situation she had described to him—help her?

His cell phone rang before he could answer that question, the ringtone of “Incy Wincy Spider” telling him exactly who his caller was. “I’m sorry, I have to take this,” he told Thea as he stood up.

“Of course.”

Fergus moved to stand a few feet away from her before answering the call. “Angel, my love, it’s lovely to hear from you!” he greeted warmly.

* * *

Thea only had to hear the affection in Fergus’s tone when he answered the call, so different from the cold and indifferent way he spoke to her, to realize her assumption that he didn’t currently have a woman in his life had been wrong.

She glanced over to where he had turned slightly away from her as he continued his conversation with the woman he called Angel and my love. He had lowered his voice so that no one—especially Thea?—could overhear what else he had to say to his lover.

Forcing Thea to acknowledge she was nothing more than an intruder in Fergus’s life. A ghost from Fergus’s past he wanted nothing to do with. A reminder of an incident in his life he would rather forget. Thea was probably someone he would rather forget. She had been a fool to ever think she could come to Paris and ask for his help.

Fergus was still turned slightly away and deep in conversation when Thea rose silently to her feet and turned to disappear into the crowds of people enjoying a leisurely stroll along the famous Champs-Élysées.

Within minutes, she was able to turn down the side street where the George V was situated. Unlike the previous times she had entered the hotel, she barely registered the opulence of the lobby as she made her way through to the elevators.

Her mind was blank as she stepped into the ornate space to press the button for the floor where her suite was situated. It remained as empty of thought after she had stepped out of the elevator and walked down the hallway to her suite.

Until she noticed that the door to her room was partly open.

Followed by the immediate thought that the maid must be inside making her bed and cleaning the room.

That thought was quickly followed by the realization that the usual service trolley wasn't parked outside with the clean sheets and toiletries stored on it.

“Hello?” Thea called hesitantly as she pushed the door open further and entered the suite.

The sitting room was as tidy as when she left it. Tidier. Which meant that the maid had already cleaned this room.

The bed was made in the adjoining bedroom, which meant the maid had cleaned in here too.

A quick glance into the bathroom showed it was empty and also tidy, clean towels hanging neatly on the heated rack at one end of the bath.

Thea turned back to the bedroom, her heart starting to beat loudly as her gaze became riveted on the only thing that definitely hadn't been there when she went out early this morning.

Sitting in the middle of the neatly made bed was the pillow—well, the pillowcase: she doubted it was the same pillow inside—that had been stolen from her apartment in London three days ago.

She froze when she heard a slight shuffling noise behind her.

Before she could turn to identify the source of that noise, something struck her hard on the side of the head, and she was immediately enveloped in darkness.

CHAPTERFOUR

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“Thea!Thea, if you’re in there I advise you to open this damned door!” Fergus warned after pounding his knuckles loudly on the wooden door to her hotel suite for several minutes and receiving no answer. “I mean it, Thea!”

To say he was furious would be to seriously understate the level of anger coursing through him both now and when he had turned around after ending his call with Angel to find Thea had disappeared.

Her disappearance was so sudden that at first, he’d wondered if her stalker had somehow taken her. But then good sense had kicked in and told him that the Champs-Élysées was far too crowded for anyone to have kidnapped a reluctant female off the street in broad daylight without someone noticing and raising an alarm.

Which meant that Thea had deliberately chosen to leave.

Which was when Fergus had become angry. He had become angrier still the more he thought about the situation.

Thea had invaded his space and disturbed his peace of mind for the past two days. Even more so once he had confronted her and he had learned exactly who she was.

His attraction to Thea—to her beauty and the delectable curve of her bottom—was just as unwelcome.

What the hellrightdid she have to just up and disappear? Especially when nothing had been settled in regard to the reason she had said she came here in the first place, namely her stalker problem?

Fergus had initially tried to reason himself out of the anger. After all, he had been the one to take a phone call in the middle of their conversation.

But the call had been personal and important to him. Angel was important to him.

His current level of anger made him suspect Thea might become even more important to him.

Might?

He was a forty-two-year-old man, and this instant attraction and fierce physical response to a woman, any woman, was unprecedented.

In the same way his brother Magnus's attraction to Sapphie had been, Fergus wondered?

And the same way his cousin Rufus's attraction to Molly had also been?

Instant attractions and inexplicable emotional reactions, which had resulted in Magnus and Rufus now being married to the women responsible.

Fergus's attraction to Thea aside, he had also begun to accept that her stalker was real and she really did need help. If not his, then someone else's.

At which point, Fergus's anger had deepened because he had realized he didn't want anyone else to help her. That he wanted to be the one to protect Thea.

Which was when he was forced to accept that his attraction to Thea was far stronger than he had previously been willing to admit. Or wanted.

It was fucked-up, bloody illogical, after the way her mother had lied and tried to trick

him all those years ago. But Fergus couldn't get Thea's shadowed golden eyes out of his head. Or the worried frown that marred the smoothness of her otherwise unblemished brow.

He had no doubt both those things were caused by the fact that she really did have a stalker.

Someone was deliberately messing with her, frightening her, with the result that she was afraid to trust anyone already in her life for fear they might have been paid or coerced into being involved in this deliberate emotional torment. Damn it, that distrust ran so deep Thea had felt she had no choice but to come to Paristo ask for his help. A man she had already known, considering their history, might just laugh in her face.

Fergus had treated her with disbelief and a certain amount of lingering suspicion at first. Not because he disliked Thea—how could he when he didn't even know her?—but because of her mother's devious actions in the past.

None of which Thea had been responsible for then, nor should she be held accountable for them now.

Fergus knew he, like everyone else in her life, from what she had told him, had let Thea down. Worse, he had taken a phone call in the middle of their conversation, proving how unimportant she and what she was telling him were to him.

Fergus had rung his office and asked his assistant to cancel his appointments for the rest of the day before coming to the hotel where Thea had told him she was staying.

After a brief and flirtatious conversation with one of the hotel receptionists, Fergus was able, by the stealth of listening and watching when she rang Thea to tell her she had a visitor waiting in reception, to know exactly on which floor Thea's suite was

situated. The call had gone unanswered, which had troubled Fergus even further as he wondered where else Thea might have gone after leaving him in the Champs-Élysées.

The fact that she wasn't responding to his knocking troubled him even more. "Thea, I am going to count to three, and if you haven't opened the door by then, I'm going to—" He broke off when he heard the lock on the other side of the door disengage before it was opened a couple of inches.

Golden eyes peered at him around that slight opening. "Yes, what are you going to do?" Thea prompted dully.

Fergus knew immediately that something was wrong. That this wasn't the same determined and fiery young woman he had met earlier.

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He was even more convinced of that when he became aware she was swaying slightly on her feet and her fingers were tightly gripping the edge of the door.

Fergus didn't waste any more time asking questions but instead took charge of the situation by pushing the door open further. He immediately grasped one of Thea's arms when she swayed even more now that she no longer had the door to lean on. That was his primary reason, but it also allowed him to step into the suite before closing and locking the door behind him.

His quick and assessing glance around the sitting room was instinctive. It also yielded nothing that he could class as a threat.

As far as he could tell, Thea was alone.

His gaze returned to her. Her face wasn't just pale; there was a gray tinge to her skin, and her expression was pained. Although Fergus couldn't see anything that might—

“Is that blood?” He reached up with the hand that wasn't holding on to her to dip his fingertips into the trail of red running down the side of her neck. The viscous stickiness of the liquid told him that it was definitely blood. “Did you hit your head?” He turned her gently to see a sizable lump and cut behind her left ear. The latter was obviously responsible for the bloody trail down her neck. “What the hell happened here?” he demanded as he turned her back to face him.

* * *

Whathappened?

Thea had no idea. One minute, she had been standing in the doorway of the bedroom of her suite and heard a noise behind her, followed by a sharp and reverberating pain, and the next thing she knew, she had woken up lying on the floor.

It had taken her several long seconds of lying there to regain her equilibrium enough to be able to gather her wits and remember that sequence of events.

A glance at her wristwatch had told her she had probably only been unconscious for a few minutes. But the throbbing at the side of her skull and the blood that stained her fingers after she had touched the area where it hurt the most told her that someone must have hit her on the side of the head.

That whoever they were had to have still been in her suite when she came back into it, possibly hiding behind the door?

That thought alone had been enough to make her cringe at the realization that something so much worse could have happened to her than just being knocked out.

The weapon used to hit her was lying on the floor beside her. It was an Art Deco brass ornament of a woman, and it usually sat on the side table just inside the main door of the suite. There was even a speck of blood on the woman's hand, evidence that was what had cut into Thea's skin.

She'd managed to sit up but had still been struggling to get back on her feet when Fergus started banging on the door leading into the hotel corridor. It had taken her a few seconds to steady herself and walk over to answer that loud knocking. Long enough she could tell by the rising anger in Fergus's accompanying voice that his frustration with her was deepening.

One glance at his furious expression, once she had opened the door a couple of inches, and she'd known her assessment had been correct.

“Explanations can wait,” Fergus dismissed. “We need to deal with your injury first. Then you can tell me what happened.”

“What are you doing?” Thea demanded as he swung her up into his arms and carried her through to the bathroom before sitting her gently on top of the marble vanity unit.

“I’m going to clean the wound.” Fergus proceeded to do exactly that after he had dampened a face cloth with cold water. “The cut doesn’t need stitches, but I still think you need to see a doctor. I can call down to reception or get my own doctor to come here and examine you?—”

“No!” Thea cut in forcefully. “I don’t want or need a doctor, yours or any other.”

Thea didn’t want to make a fuss. She never had. Probably as a result of her mother’s anger ten years ago, once Thea was recovered enough from her emergency appendectomy to withstand being berated for having ruined all of her mother’s plans for a future with Fergus Wynter.

“I’m fine,” Thea insisted as she slowly eased down from the vanity unit onto the marble floor. She forced herself to keep her balance, not willing to show any sign of weakness. Although she had a feeling the pallor of her cheeks might give her away.

Fergus’s scowl said it did. “You could have a concussion.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” she repeated fiercely before turning back into the bedroom.

What she needed to see, to know, was if she had just been imagining things earlier.

“What are you doing?” Fergus scowled darkly as he followed her through to the bedroom.

The familiar pillow—or maybe just the pillowcase put onto a pillow here? Not that it mattered which it was—that had been stolen from her apartment in London was still exactly where she had last seen it: sitting in the middle of the king-sized bed in her hotel suite in Paris.

She knew she hadn't brought it with her, and it definitely hadn't been there before she went out earlier.

"Steady," Fergus soothed when Thea reached out to grip the door frame to once again stop herself from swaying. "What is it?" He glanced around the room.

Thea knew he would see nothing unusual. That the room was tidy, as she had noted earlier, and the bed was made. There were very few personal items to disturb that tidiness, an e-reader on the bedside table and her reading glasses, because Thea had brought very little with her for this four-day stay.

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No, the only thing out of place was the pillow in the center of the bed, and she doubted Fergus would see anything unusual about that?—

“What’s this?” He stepped forward to stand at the bottom of the bed before reaching down for the pillow.

“Don’t touch it!” Thea ignored the increased pounding in her head as she rushed to grab the pillow and hug it against her chest.

“Is that the pillow you told me had been stolen?” he prompted gently.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing me of lying?”

“No—”

“This pillow wasn’t here when I left my suite this morning,” she told him defensively. “No matter what you might think to the contrary.”

“I don’t?—”

“Yes, you do,” she accused fiercely. “You were skeptical earlier when I told you the pillow had been stolen from my apartment in London. Now, because it’s in my hotel suite in Paris, you must think I was lying about the whole thing.”

* * *

Did he?

Fergus wasn't sure what he believed anymore.

He did know, after one look at the pillowcase, obviously designed for a child—he thought it might be a Disney princess?—on the pillow sitting incongruously in the middle of the king-size bed in a suite in this prestigious Paris hotel, that it didn't belong there.

“I was so distracted by finding it here when I came back earlier,” Thea continued, “that it allowed someone to come up behind me and hit me on the back of the head. Someone who had somehow managed to get into my suite and was still here when I returned. The door was ajar when I got back. But I just thought it was the maid cleaning the rooms.” She frowned.

“But it clearly wasn't.”

She shivered. “No. I entered the suite and called out for the maid. When she didn't answer, I realized something was wrong.”

“Did you see who struck you?”

“As I said, they hit me from behind, so no.”

Fergus's thoughts raced in rapid-fire succession, the conclusion to all of them very clear. “It would seem your stalker has followed you to Paris after all.”

“Does that mean you believe me now, about the stalker and the stolen pillow?”

“I never said I didn't believe you.”

“You didn't need to. It's okay,” she sighed. “What choice did you have? I am my mother's daughter, after all.”

And the sooner Fergus dismissed that association, the better. Because he now had no doubts that someone was stalking Thea, and that they had attacked her a short time ago.

“Would I be right in thinking this pillow, the pillowcase, at least, has some sort of emotional connection to your deceased father?” The childish design indicated that might be the case.

“You’re good at your job, aren’t you,” Thea admired.

“Very good.” False modesty was out of place here.

She nodded, tears glistened in those beautiful golden eyes. “Dad took me to see the film the year it came out. I was eight, and I begged to have the themed duvet and pillowcase as a Christmas present. My mother said they were too expensive, that the money could be better spent on a night out for the two of them. But my dad—he bought them for me anyway.”

Fergus could too easily imagine the selfish Jessica denying her daughter such a trivial gift if it meant spending money she would rather spend on something she could enjoy.

“It was the last Christmas we had together before he—before my dad died,” Thea revealed. “The duvet cover was lost somewhere along the way, with all the moves we made after that,” she related flatly.

* * *

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Fergus could too easily imagine how that much-loved duvet cover had become “lost.” Jessica really had been a complete bitch, even to her own daughter.

“I managed to hold on to the pillowcase.” Thea’s arms tightened possessively about the pillow as the tears began to fall unchecked down her cheeks, a defiant challenge in her eyes as if she were daring Fergus to doubt her again.

And that, right there, was proof enough to Fergus that everything Thea had told him, about the break-in at her apartment and theft of the pillow, having a stalker, and Lev Yegorov’s unwanted marriage proposal, was true.

Fergus was immediately suffused with feelings of self-disgust for having ever doubted her. Thea wasn’t a liar and a manipulator like her mother had been. Thinking she was stopped right here and now.

Quite how this acceptance, and the fact that she needed his help, was going to equate with the increasing attraction he now admitted to feeling toward her—and the lustful thoughts of that tantalizing arse that now tormented him!—was his problem to deal with, not hers.

“But maybe I’m just sticking to that story because you caught me out by coming here and seeing the pillow for yourself?” The defiance was still there on Thea’s face and in those challenging golden eyes.

Fergus felt that accusation like a blow to his chest. “Did you hit yourself on the side of the head too? Not an easy thing to do, by the way,” he assured. “And then arrange for me to arrive at your hotel suite so that I could be a witness to it all, when you had

no reason to think you would ever see me again after you snuck away in the middle of our conversation?” He quirked a challenging brow of his own.

“I didn’t sneak... You were talking to—to your girlfriend.” Her gaze avoided meeting his. “I didn’t want to intrude, and I believed our conversation to be over.”

“My girlfriend?” Fergus repeated softly.

“My Angel!” she scorned.

Fergus frowned at her accusing tone. Why on earth?—

No, it wasn’t an accusation exactly. It sounded more like... Could it be jealousy?

Did that mean Thea was as attracted to him as Fergus now acknowledged he was to her?

A mutual attraction was a complication Fergus hadn’t anticipated.

Not that it made any difference to what happened next. He had made the decision to help Thea, and that was exactly what he was going to do.

Should he tell Thea who Angel really was, or should he leave her with the misconception he was already involved with someone?

No, that wasn’t the question he should be asking.

The real question was whether or not he was going to be able to keep his hands off Thea in the days, possibly weeks, to come.

The first time he failed to do so, she was going to think he was a two-timing bastard

who was cheating on his girlfriend.

One look at Thea's silky reddish-brown hair, her pale but beautiful face, and slender but perfectly curved body, and Fergus doubted he was going to be able to resist her for much longer.

Especially if, as he now intended to do, he spent more time with her when they traveled back to England together.

CHAPTERFIVE

"Angel is my niece, not my girlfriend."

It took Thea several seconds to absorb Fergus's words. "Your niece...?" she finally prompted guardedly.

He nodded. "Step-niece, actually, but the minute my brother Magnus fell in love with Sapphie, who is Angel's mother, they both became members of our family."

"Magnus is your twin, right?"

Fergus nodded. "But we're not identical."

Thea doubted the female population could cope with two Ferguses!

Except she had seen photographs of Magnus when she was looking into what Fergus was doing now and where he lived, and she knew that his twin was just as lethally attractive as he was, but in a more rugged sort of way. Magnus was just as tall and intimidating as his twin, but he also had a thick, dark beard and was so muscular, he looked as if he could bench-press a truck. Fergus had a muscular chest and arms too, just not so defined they looked as if his arms might burst out of his tailored jacket.

“Angel is only four years old,” Fergus continued. “And she has a love for spiders, hence the ringtone when she calls me.”

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Thea felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders. “Your niece is a four-year-old who loves spiders.” She couldn’t stop the shudder running through her just thinking about arachnids. She disliked spiders of all sizes.

“Yes,” Fergus confirmed ruefully. “She has her own pet spider she calls Henry. Which totally freaked Magnus out when he first met Angel and Sapphie. He solved the problem by buying her a special see-through Perspex case to keep the spider in. Now she keeps begging Magnus and her mother for a Mrs. Henry, so they can have babies. None of us want to tell her that Mrs. Henry would probably eat Angel’s beloved Henry after they’ve mated.”

This conversation was so ridiculous that Thea knew it had to be the truth. Unless that knock on the head had caused more damage than she’d realized?

“No, I really do have a niece who loves spiders and has one as a pet.” Fergus answered the question Thea had obviously spoken out loud without realizing she had. “I really think you should let me call a doctor to at least check you over,” he added with a frown at what was probably her perplexed expression. “The possibility of a concussion isn’t to be dismissed lightly.”

“We’ll see,” she said evasively. “Why did you tell me all that about Angel?” There was really no reason for him to do so, as far as she could see. Unless...

“I think you know why,” he answered in a low voice.

She tensed. “Do I?”

“Yes.” He stepped so close to her that Thea’s nostrils were filled with the spicy scent of his cologne and male musk.

Fergus’s gaze was searching as it roamed over what Thea guessed would be the paleness of her face. She had little color at the best of times, but she imagined she’d have even less after being knocked unconscious.

He raised one of his hands to cradle the side of her face as he stared down at her intently. “I told you the truth about Angel because I don’t want there to be any more unnecessary misunderstandings or barriers between us.”

Thea didn’t miss the “more” in that statement. Which was ludicrous when all the barriers between them had been created by her mother’s past behavior.

“This was a mistake,” she realized. “I should never have come here and asked for your help.”

“Why did you?”

“Because I don’t have anyone else I can ask,” she was forced to admit.

“No family?”

“No.”

“What about friends?”

“I told you we moved around a lot after my father died. Too much for me to be able to make and keep friends. I did have friends at university. Had being a correct description. That changed after my mother very publicly married Andrei Yegorov. After that, the friends who were ordinary and nice were nervous about who my

stepfather was, and tended to avoid me, and the ones who weren't so nice just wanted to be with the girl whose stepfather was a rich Russian oligarch."

"Nice."

She gave a derisive huff. "They very quickly learned I wasn't in the least wealthy by association, because I had little or nothing to do with the man my mother married, and that included taking money from him. I have my colleagues at school now, of course, most of whom don't have any idea who my mother and stepfather were. That goes for the parents of the kids I teach too. My mother died during this last Christmas holiday, so I didn't even have to arrange to take time off for the funeral."

"What about a boyfriend? And I don't mean Lev," he dismissed harshly.

"My last relationship ended several months ago."

"Your decision or his?"

"Mutual. But it became completely mine after my mother died and left me all that money and Martin then decided that perhaps he could put up with my scrawny arse after all, now that I'm an heiress."

Fergus's eyes widened. "He called your arsescrawny?"

"Amongst other things."

"Firstly, he sounds like an idiot and a bastard, and you're well rid of him. Secondly, I can say with all sincerity that your arse isn't in the least scrawny."

She blinked. "You can?"

He nodded. “It’s pert. Perfectly round and juicy. Biteable,” he grated.

She eyed him uncertainly. “I don’t understand...”

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“I’m trying to say that I like your arse.”

She pulled away from him, her eyes wide. “What the...? Why are you saying these things to me?”

“Being honest, you mean?”

“Is that what you’re being?”

“Yes,” he acknowledged heavily. “In the interest of continuing with that honesty, it isn’t just your arse I like.”

“No?”

“I like you too.”

She shook her head. “You don’t sound very happy about it if that’s the case.”

He huffed a laugh. “Can you blame me?”

Not when she was the daughter of the woman who had set out to destroy Fergus, socially and publicly, when he wouldn’t agree to marry her.

Even now, Thea cringed, remembering how Jessica had told Fergus she was pregnant with his child as a ploy to trick him into marrying her after he had ended things between them because of all her lies.

Jessica had balked when Fergus refused to marry her and had instead insisted on accompanying Jessica to see an obstetrician to confirm the pregnancy.

The possibility of her lie being exposed had frightened Jessica so much that a week later, she told Fergus she had miscarried the baby.

That should have been the end of it, but instead Jessica had threatened to go to the more lurid newspapers and tell them how badly Fergus had treated her, before and after she lost his baby. She had demanded he give her money to maintain her silence.

At the time, that negative publicity would have harmed not only Fergus but Wynter Security and the whole of the Wynter family. Fergus had immediately hired a lawyer to fight against the extortion.

Jessica had done the same, telling her lawyer the same sob story she had told Fergus.

Thea had been horrified by her mother's machinations. Especially when she knew her mother couldn't have been pregnant in the first place because she hadn't been able to have any more children after Thea was born.

Thea had been so upset that for the first time in her life, she had challenged her mother.

Since her father died six years earlier, she'd tried to be understanding about her mother's grief, the half dozen relationships she'd had that hadn't worked out, and the financial worries she claimed to have about their future.

Thea had considered the latter to be questionable, considering her mother had not only been the recipient of her father's life insurance when he died, but she had also received a huge settlement from the oil company he worked for.

But hounding a man, whose only mistake had been to go out on three dates with her mother, and then trying to extort him into marrying her or giving her money to pay for her silence, was something Thea could not condone or remain silent about.

Her mother had been furious when Thea had gone to her lawyer and told him the truth, before threatening to go to the newspapers and do the same with them if Jessica dared to lie to them too. She had even told her mother she would offer to give evidence on Fergus's behalf if she persisted with these lies.

Her mother had resisted at first, claiming that no one would listen to anything a fourteen-year-old girl had to say.

Thea's response had been to pick up the telephone and start to put a call through to the firm of lawyers she knew were working on Fergus's behalf.

Her mother had furiously pressed the End Call button.

She had ranted and raved at Thea for some time after that, but Thea had remained adamant: if her mother didn't cease harassing Fergus immediately, she would expose her mother for the liar she was.

Her mother had reluctantly backed down and dropped the case, but things had never been the same between her and Thea after that. Which was probably why, when her mother married Andrei five years later, the two of them had rarely spoken in between those obligatory birthday and Christmas meet-ups.

None of which was Fergus's fault. He had been the victim, not the instigator.

Thea winced at the realization she had mentally drifted away from their conversation to relive those painful memories.

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “After what happened with my mother, you can’t possibly want anything to do with me on a personal level.”

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Fergus gave a hard, humorless laugh. “I admit, I don’t want to want you. But I can’t deny, in spite of everything, that I do. And I have no intention of lying to myself, or you, about it.”

Thea’s frown deepened. “But we won’t be seeing each other again after you leave the hotel today.”

When she left the hotel too, she acknowledged heavily. Because she had no intention of remaining here for the rest of her stay in Paris after someone had not only broken in but physically attacked her.

“When I leave here today, you’re coming with me,” Fergus told her. “Either that, or I stay here with you tonight,” he challenged when she was about to protest. “In the meantime, I’ll make arrangements for the family-owned Wynter private jet to be waiting for us at the airport tomorrow, along with a team of bodyguards to accompany us back to England.”

Thea had a feeling she’d missed something. Because of the blow to her head? Whatever the reason, she wasn’t sure she had heard Fergus correctly.

Had he really just said, after so shockingly revealing that he wanted her and liked her arse, that he was flying to England with her tomorrow?

That in the meantime, he intended either to spend the night here with her at the hotel or she was going back to his home with him until they flew out of Paris tomorrow on his family’s private jet?

More importantly, she was still having trouble processing the fact that Fergus had said he wanted to bite her arse...?

CHAPTER SIX

“I think you made the right decision,” Fergus told Thea as he let the two of them into his house in Paris’s 7th arrondissement.

She snorted as she followed him along the hallway and up the stairs. “Did I really have a choice?”

He placed her single bag on the floor inside an elegantly furnished bedroom decorated in pale cream and green. There was a view of the Eiffel Tower from the windows.

He turned to face her. “When it comes to me, I promise you will always have a choice,” he assured huskily.

A blush brightened the hollows of her cheeks. “Did I have a choice when you made a call to your doctor earlier and arranged for him to arrive here shortly so that he could examine me to make sure I don’t have a concussion?”

Fergus smiled inwardly, knowing she hadn’t voiced the question she really wanted to ask. Yes, his comments earlier had been outrageous, but that didn’t make it any less true that he had wanted Thea since that first day when he had found himself unable to look away from her or the curvaceous perfection of her bottom as she followed him around Paris.

He shrugged. “I gave you the choice of him coming to your hotel suite or here. You chose here.”

“Because I didn’t want to stay at the hotel another moment longer than I had to. I couldn’t remain in that room where...where my stalker had been.”

Fergus’s humor faded. When Thea returned to the hotel earlier she had initially believed the door to her suite had been left slightly ajar because the maid was in there cleaning, Fergus believed Thea’s stalker had probably entered her hotel suite when the maid was cleaning the rooms.

But he couldn’t be a hundred percent sure that was how the stalker had got inside Thea’s suite, which was why he was pleased Thea had agreed to accompany him to his home. Arranging for his doctor to come and examine her wasn’t an option he intended to give her.

Fergus stepped forward to lightly clasp the tops of Thea’s arms. “You’re here with me now, and I won’t allow anything or anyone to hurt you while you’re under my protection.” His brow lowered. “Least of all some coward who stalks a woman and then breaks into her hotel suite before knocking her unconscious.” He hadn’t mentioned it to Thea, but he was also concerned about what else the stalker might have planned to do in her hotel suite if she hadn’t returned and interrupted him.

He’d seen some really sick shit during the last twenty years of co-owning and running a security company.

Setting up security for a business could be complicated enough, but personal security could, and often was, even more so. Because it could become very personal.

As he believed it now had with Thea.

The person stalking her had now broken into her personal space not once but twice. Once in her apartment in London, and then again in her hotel room here in Paris.

Which meant the bastard had definitely followed her here.

In Fergus's experience, these things could spiral out of control very quickly.

Not if he had any say in it!

He'd told Thea how he felt earlier because he didn't want there to ever be the slightest suspicion in her mind that his attraction to her had anything to do with revenge for her mother's past behavior. He wanted Thea in spite of who her mother was.

Yes, it was fucked-up that he wanted the daughter of the woman who had tried to blackmail him ten years ago. But he had watched his twin and cousin both fall for women who, on paper, were just as unsuitable for them. Maybe not as much as Thea was for him, but there was no denying he had known there was no walking away from her from the moment he looked into her eyes and became lost in those familiar golden depths.

He narrowed his eyes. "What were you thinking about earlier after I told you I'm attracted to you?"

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Her gaze veered away. Which could, Fergus reasoned, be because she was embarrassed by his earlier bluntness. Or it could be for another reason entirely.

“Thea?”

“I—” She broke off at the sound of the doorbell ringing downstairs. “That’s probably the doctor,” she prompted when Fergus didn’t move.

“He can wait until you’ve answered my question.”

A derisive smile curved her lips. “I think since we last met, you’ve become far too used to issuing orders and having people obey them.”

He smiled. “I hate to disillusion you, but my years in the military mean I’ve always issued orders and expected people to obey them.”

She shook her head. “My mother didn’t know you at all, did she?”

His jaw tightened. “Not in the slightest. Now answer the damned question.”

“You might not have any manners, but I do.” She pulled out of his grasp as the doorbell rang a second time. “The doctor has been kept waiting long enough.”

“And he will be paid generously for his time.”

“Money isn’t the be-all and end-all of everything,” she snapped, turning to leave the bedroom.

Fergus followed her down the hallway to the stairs, intending to continue their conversation. Instead, he immediately became distracted by the sway of her hips and the way her jeans hugged the delectable curve of the bottom he wanted to lay hands on and pleasure until she screamed for mercy.

Fucking hell.

This desire for her was getting totally out of hand.

Out of control.

His control.

* * *

Thea had no idea what Fergus was thinking behind those hooded eyes as he stood in the doorway of the elegant sitting room. He had briefly excused himself to make a phone call while the doctor was examining her.

Now he watched her intently, his brooding expression telling her that whatever his thoughts were, they were very intense.

Making her wonder how it would feel to have all that intensity of emotion focused on her.

As it had been earlier, when he told her he thought she was beautiful and he wanted to bite her arse!

Thea was still trying to process that comment. No one had ever spoken to her in such a forthright way before. It was as thrilling as it was unexpected, coming from a man she believed might despise her.

Fergus seemed just as disconcerted by the attraction he admitted to feeling for her.

It felt even more surreal being here in his home with him.

It was a huge house, the architecture probably dating back to the seventeenth century. It looked as if it possibly had a dozen bedrooms and just as many bathrooms, with half a dozen reception rooms downstairs. It was a huge house for one man to live in alone.

Thea had seen an enclosed solarium as they walked through the cavernous entrance hall earlier, no doubt to be used on the days when the weather was too inclement for going outside. The copious amount of plants gave the glass space the appearance and feeling of being in the garden.

There was a huge walled garden to the back of the house, along with a glass passageway to an enclosed swimming pool.

The only way into those grounds and the house was through those high-security gates at the front of the property.

The inside of the house was as elegant and beautifully furnished as it had looked from the outside. There were marble statues placed about the large marble entrance hall. The ornate furniture, in the visible rooms, looked as if it also dated back to the seventeenth century. There had even been a four-poster bed in the guest bedroom Fergus had assigned to her for the duration of her stay.

Thea had expected there to be an army of servants and a housekeeper or cook to run such a large establishment. But Fergus had told her on the way over here that he didn't have a staff. He had a cleaning service come in twice a week, his groceries were delivered, and he enjoyed doing his own cooking.

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This room, the green salon, as Fergus had called it, was decorated in different shades of green, the furniture all white, with gold leaf edging the dado rail, the panels around the paintings on the walls, and the painted ceiling above. The pale green wallpaper looked as if it were embossed with gold.

The whole property resembled some of the country houses, open to the public, that Thea had occasionally visited in England.

The doctor was a middle-aged man who spoke only enough English to reassure her the cut didn't need stitches, nor did she have a concussion. He did give her some painkillers to take if she needed them.

"All the arrangements for our return to England have been made," Fergus told her when he returned to the salon after seeing the doctor out. "Declan Quinn will be on board the jet when it arrives tomorrow, along with the rest of his team."

Thea frowned. "Who is Declan Quinn?"

"Good question." Fergus grimaced. "He turned up a couple of years ago asking for a job, and since that time, he's proven himself to be the best damn bodyguard we employ in the UK. Linus checked Declan's background before we employed him, of course, but once he had cleared that security check, and at Declan's request, that information remains between the two of them. All any of the rest of us really need to know is that he can be totally trusted and he's excellent at his job."

Thea stood up, feeling at too much of a disadvantage sitting on the sofa while Fergus loomed across the room. "I don't need a team of bodyguards, let alone one headed by

the best bodyguard Wynter Security employs in the UK.”

“You came to me for help,” Fergus reminded. “This is my way of helping.”

“I can’t afford a team of bodyguards—” She didn’t get to finish that sentence as Fergus crossed the room in two strides to stand in front of her. She stared up at him as his large hands cradled either side of her face.

“You won’t be paying,” he assured her.

“But—”

“No.” His gaze roamed over her features. “God, you are so beautiful. Too beautiful for me to resist doing this a moment longer,” he murmured achingly before he lowered his head, and his lips captured hers.

At twenty-four, Thea had been kissed before, many times, but being kissed by Fergus was unlike any of those previous experiences.

Her mind went completely blank. All she could do was feel and be aware of everything that was Fergus. The hardness of his body pressed against hers. The softness of his lips exploring her own in one long kiss after another. The warmth of their intermingling breath. The gentle caress of his fingers against her throat. The press of his thumbs beneath her chin as he held her face up to his as he increased the heat and passion of those kisses.

It was only kisses, but kisses so passionately intense, it was the most intense sexual experience of Thea’s life.

Bar none.

Her hands moved to clasp his wrists as she rose up on her tiptoes to return that passion, her lips parting as Fergus swept his tongue across them.

He licked inside, exploring, igniting nerve endings Thea hadn't even known she had. Creating a pleasure that coursed through her whole body.

Her breasts felt heavy with arousal, the nipples tingling and swollen.

Between her thighs was hot and wet, and growing hotter and wetter by the second.

She gasped, swaying slightly on her feet, when Fergus suddenly ended the kiss to look down at her with green eyes that were now almost completely black.

He rested his forehead against hers. "I apologize. It was thoughtless of me to do that so soon after you were attacked and knocked unconscious."

Thea's fingers tightened about his wrists. "Does that mean you'll kiss me again once you consider I'm fully recovered?"

His lips curved into a smile of self-derision. "I don't think I'll be able to stop myself."

"With my agreement," she said, lightly mocking his earlier comment.

He chuckled. "With your agreement."

"You already have it," she said softly.

He drew in a deep breath before releasing her and stepping back. "The doctor said you need to eat with the painkillers, so I'm going to cook us both a light lunch. After which, I suggest you go and lie down and sleep for a while before we decide what we're going to do about dinner. Sound good?"

“Very.” Much as Thea would have liked the two of them to continue kissing, the idea of lying down and sleeping for a while sounded tempting too. She wasn’t about to tell Fergus, but she had a terrible headache, and a couple of pain pills plus some food, followed by a lie down and sleep, sounded like heaven.

Fergus prepared and they both ate scrambled eggs and smoked salmon before he handed her a couple of the painkillers and a glass of water. He then accompanied her back up the stairs to the bedroom he had shown her earlier. Just as well, because Thea doubted she could have found it again on her own.

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“The doors open out onto the balcony, but it’s a little cool still.” Fergus stepped toward the top of the bed and removed all the throw pillows before placing them on the chair near the window. “If you give me your pillowcase, I’ll wash and dry it while you’re resting.”

Tears stung Thea's eyes at his thoughtfulness in recognizing she might have an aversion to cuddling up to something that had been in her stalker's possession. She couldn't remember anyone else ever being this thoughtful about her feelings.

“There’s no reason to cry.” Fergus gently wiped away a single tear after it had escaped her lashes and fallen down her cheek. “From now on, I’m going to be the person protecting you.”

“I thought that was Declan.”

Fergus smiled slightly. “He might be head of the team, but I’m one of the owners of the company. Which means he answers to me,” he grated. “I don’t intend to leave your side again until this situation has been settled.”

A statement that immediately caused Thea to begin crying in earnest. She had been on her own for most of her life, it seemed, with only herself to rely on. Certainly for the past ten years, her mother never having forgiven her for threatening to expose her machinations toward Fergus.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Fergus enfolded her into the warmth of his arms to hold her against his chest. “I’m here now.”

Thea only wished that were true. But she knew it wasn't, not in the way she wanted after those sensual kisses they had shared earlier.

But her whole life had been one of concessions and accommodation, usually in the other person's favor. Accepting what Fergus had to give, for however long he wanted to give it, would just be one more compromise she'd make in a long line of them.

Although Thea had a feeling that eventually having to walk away from him was going to be the hardest thing she had ever done.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Thea came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs when she heard the sound of voices. Which, considering the digital clock on the nightstand beside the four-poster in her bedroom indicated it was after midnight, seemed an unusual time for Fergus to be having a visitor.

Unless Fergus had been lying and he did have a girlfriend after all?

One who had arrived to spend the night after Thea had gone to bed?

She had managed to sleep this afternoon after taking the first painkiller, waking up in time to eat the dinner of steak and salad Fergus had prepared.

He was a good cook, the steak juicy and perfectly grilled, the salad having a mustard dressing that he told her he had made himself.

There was something very sexy about a man who enjoyed cooking, for himself as well as guests.

After Thea had complimented him on the meal, their conversation had become...

Stilted was probably the best way of describing their discussion of the attractions of Paris.

Neither of them seemed inclined to talk about what had happened earlier. Thea was avoiding it because Fergus was, not because she regretted it.

Kissing Fergus had been the single most erotic experience of her life. Creating a fierce need that had almost burned out of control.

But Fergus's distant behavior during dinner told her it wasn't going to happen again anytime soon.

She had made her excuses and gone back up to her bedroom shortly after they had eaten. She'd showered before going back to bed and finally falling into a fitful sleep. Only to wake up again a couple of hours later, unable to return to that disturbed slumber.

Coming downstairs in search of a glass of water, she hadn't expected to hear Fergus in conversation with someone.

Thea slowly walked in the direction of those voices, realizing as she drew nearer, and the voices became louder, that they were both male.

Not a girlfriend, then.

Then who?—

“Mag, will you shut up and just listen to me! You don't seem to be appreciating the importance of what I'm saying.”

“I accept it's important to you.”

“Because I feel as if I’m losing my fucking mind! I have to be to have kissed the daughter of the woman who once tried to blackmail me into marrying her or paying her off.”

The harshness of his tone and the truth of his words made Thea wince.

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“Thea was a child at the time, and she certainly isn’t responsible for the actions of her mother,” the other man reasoned.

A man Thea realized had to be Fergus’s twin, Magnus Wynter. As far as she knew, Magnus was in England. Which meant the two men were talking on speakerphone?

“Exactly, ten years ago, Thea was a child of fourteen, whereas I was already a thirty-two-year-old man.” Fergus sounded angry at that being the case.

“Did you want her then?”

“Don’t be a fucking pervert!” Fergus snapped.

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“I did notice her eyes then,” Fergus admitted.

Thea’s attention sharpened.

“Her eyes?” Magnus repeated.

“They’re a rich burnished gold I had never seen before or since.”

“Nice,” Magnus appreciated. “Well, those unusual eyes now belong to a twenty-four-year-old woman.”

“A woman I kissed earlier and now can’t stop thinking about,” Fergus admitted, the

sound of his voice now seeming to be moving up and down the room rather than remaining in one place.

Did that mean he was pacing?

“Did she kiss you back?” Magnus probed.

“I... Well... Yes, she did...”

“Then she obviously isn’t bothered by the past or the age gap.”

“I kissed her after she’d been hit on the head by a blunt object,” Fergus grumbled.

“And after she’d been examined by a doctor who said she didn’t have a concussion. In other words, despite what I might think about her mental state for having kissed you, Thea one hundred percent knew what she was doing when she responded to you.”

“Maybe,” Fergus muttered. “You and Sapphie have the same age gap. Did it bother you?”

“Of course it bothered me. But not enough to stop me from asking her to marry me and making her my wife. Because, at the end of the day, I love Sapphie and she loves me. In those circumstances, age becomes just a number that isn’t really relevant to the feelings the two people have for each other.”

“How the hell did you cope with this?”

“Define ‘this.’”

“At ten o’clock this morning, my life, apart from my annoyance that someone was following me, was the same as yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before

that.”

“Boring?”

“I’m not bored, Mag. At least, I don’t think I was... Whatever I was,” he continued. “Just hours later, after speaking with and kissing Thea, I want to protect her at the same time as I can’t stop thinking about throwing her down on the nearest flat surface and thrusting my dick inside her!”

“That sounds pretty standard for this sort of situation.”

“Define ‘standard’ and ‘this sort of situation’?”

“You’ve finally met a woman you want physically but also want to protect and take care of. A woman who, according to Declan, you are flying back to England with on the company jet tomorrow. A woman whose safety you have assigned to our best UK team.”

“I don’t?—”

“When I met Sapphie, I followed her to Scotland in the company helicopter. When we had to travel to the US on the company jet to resolve her situation, I assigned our best team over there, headed by Knox, to protect her. You know my aversion to arachnids, and yet I now have one living with me full-time,” Magnus added self-derisively.

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“Does this mean I’m as fucked as you are?”

“I doubt Sapphie would like you referring to the two of us falling in love as me being fucked,” Magnus taunted.

“But you’re going to tell her I said it anyway.”

“Of course,” his twin assured with relish.

“You’re a bastard.” Fergus groaned. “And you still haven’t told me how I’m supposed to go to bed and try to sleep, knowing Thea is in the bedroom just down the hallway from my own.”

“Have you tried sleeping?”

“Of course I’ve fucking tried!” Fergus snapped. “I want her too much to be able to stop thinking about her, which stops me from falling asleep.”

“You’re thinking about all of her?”

“Yes.”

“I thought it was her arse you wanted?” the other man taunted.

Thea’s cheeks bloomed with heat at hearing someone else make that same comment about her bottom.

“And what the hell is that all about?” Fergus fumed. “I’m a leg man, always have been.”

“Obviously not when it comes to Thea,” Magnus reasoned.

“I can’t believe I said all those things to her after only actually speaking to her for an hour or so,” Fergus groaned.

“But you told me you’d noticed her, and her arse, long before that.”

Two days and three hours before that, in fact, Thea recalled.

“I did, but…” Fergus made a huffing noise. “Dear God, I’m supposed to be the suave and sophisticated one.”

“And I’m the rough and gruff one,” his twin acknowledged without rancor.

“Well, my suave buggered off hours ago and took sophistication with it.” Fergus sighed heavily. “God knows what Thea must think of me.”

“For admiring and wanting her arse?” Magnus mused.

“I said I wanted to bite it, not that I want it, per se.”

“Don’t you?”

“Maybe,” Fergus conceded guardedly.

“Have you ever had anal sex?”

“No, have you?”

“I’m a married man, which means I’m not going to answer any questions about my sex life,” Magnus dismissed lightly.

Fergus gave a heavy sigh. “What the hell am I going to do?”

“Well, from the sound of it, after you fly back to England tomorrow with Thea, you’re going to hunt down the person who has been stalking her and has now followed and attacked her in Paris. While you’re doing that, you also seem to intend to fondle and bite Thea’s arse as often as she’ll let you,” Magnus added conversationally.

“Have I told you lately what a fucker you are?” Fergus grumbled.

Magnus’s chuckle completely lacked sympathy. “I can’t tell you how much I’m enjoying hearing my little brother squirm.”

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“I’m only five minutes younger than you, you old bastard.”

“Which makes you my little brother.” Magnus stated the obvious. “What was Thea’s reaction when you told her you want to bite her arse?”

“She—”

“She was a little disconcerted at first,” Thea said as she entered what proved to be a study, from the presence of the large mahogany desk against one wall, several files cluttering its surface, and the other three book-lined walls.

She had become increasingly uncomfortable about listening in on the brothers’ conversation—especially when so much of it was about her—without their knowledge.

“But now I’m more curious than concerned,” she added huskily.

CHAPTEREIGHT

Fergus could only stare at Thea as she stood in the open doorway, too shocked by her sudden appearance to be able to respond to what she’d said.

“Is that my cue to end the call?” Magnus drawled through the speakerphone.

“Yes, you can fuck right off,” Fergus dismissed distractedly as he continued to stare at Thea.

She was wearing a deep gold-colored silk camisole and matching shorts she had obviously changed into earlier to sleep in. They were the same deep gold color as her eyes.

The thin camisole straps left her slender shoulders and arms bare and revealed the slope of her uptilted breasts. The shorts rested low on her hips, her legs bare and slender.

Her reddish-brown hair was slightly tousled, as if she had been to sleep but woken up again and had now come downstairs in search of...

Him?

"I came downstairs for a glass of water." Thea's explanation immediately dispelled that thought. "I can't sleep, so I thought I'd take another couple of painkillers."

That hope?

Jesus, this obsession was getting out of hand!

Getting?

It was already way out of his control.

"Nice to meet you, Thea," His brother's voice sounded slightly hollow through the speakerphone.

"Magnus," she returned, revealing that she had overheard enough of their conversation to at least know who Fergus was talking to.

What else had she heard?

“I’m sorry you’re having a few problems at the moment.” Magnus continued his conversation with Thea. “Not the least being having to put up with my pain-in-the-arse brother. Oops, sorry, Fergus, I probably shouldn’t have said that, under the circumstances,” he taunted insincerely.

Fergus scowled when he saw the fiery blush now coloring Thea’s cheeks. “I thought I told you to fuck off,” he snapped at his twin.

“Since when have I ever done anything you told—” The sentence wasn’t finished because Fergus had pressed the End Call button.

“I apologize. You obviously overheard me talking about you, us, this...” he fumbled for the right word as he waved a hand between the two of them, “with my brother. I just... You were on my mind, and...” He drew in a controlling breath before continuing. “Mag and I have always had an emotional connection that tells us when the other one is upset. It’s a twin thing, I think. When he called me a short time ago to ask me what was wrong, I just blurted it all out. ‘It’ being my having kissed you,” he hurried to explain. “Along with my sudden fixation on your... Shit, stop talking, Fergus. You’re just making this situation worse.” He closed his eyes as he muttered to himself.

As if doing so could even begin to shut out the awkwardness of this situation.

* * *

Thea could see and feel Fergus’s discomfort. She just had no idea whether he felt that way because she had overheard him talking to his brother about something so intimate, or because she was the recipient of his confusion over those feelings and had obviously overheard some of their conversation.

Most of it, by the sound of it.

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She was momentarily distracted by the fact Fergus was still wearing the jeans and thin green sweater he had changed into earlier before cooking their dinner.

The latter clung to his wide chest and muscular shoulders, the sleeves of the sweater pushed up to just below his elbows. His dark blue jeans molded to the contour of his waist and hips.

As Thea had thought might be the case, he looked even sexier in casual clothing, with his hair tousled as if he had been running his hands through it, than he did in a suit. And he was breathtaking in a suit.

“Did you mean it?” Fergus finally prompted. “That you’re curious about—about?”

“Having my bottom caressed and then bitten?” she finished ruefully. “Well, it’s something to think about, at least.”

He winced. “But not something you’re interested in ever becoming a reality?”

She gave a smile at how telling his deliberately casual tone was: her answer mattered to him. “What are you going to do with it after you’ve bitten it?”

“Kiss it better,” he came back instantly.

Thea couldn’t help but chuckle at the raw honesty of his answer, even as a thrill of anticipation coursed through her. “That sounds...intriguing.”

“In a good way or a bad way?”

“I won’t really know until after the deed is done,” she came back ruefully.

Fergus stilled, eyeing her warily. As if she were an unexploded bomb that might blow up in his face.

Maybe she was?

Because Thea’s physical response to Fergus—her nipples were engorged and visibly poking against the silk material of her camisole, and the wet heat between her thighs was dampening her sleep shorts—was way off the charts to anything she had ever felt for any other man.

Martin was twenty-seven, and he seemed like nothing but a boy compared to the inborn self-confidence and experience Fergus exuded without even thinking about it.

Probably because he was self-confident and experienced!

Whereas Thea was...well, neither of those things.

Oh, she had the self-confidence to be able to do her job. To be any other way when teaching teenagers would have had those pupils reducing her to nothing more than a blubbing mess crying in the corner of the classroom. Kids weren’t just cruel in the face of weakness, they could be heartless.

Her private life was something else entirely.

Maybe it was all those years of having her needs and desires ignored by her mother, more so than ever after her father died. Or perhaps it was that Martin had been the last in a long line of men whose interest in her had ultimately proven to be less than genuine once he discovered who her stepfather was and how wealthy her mother was because of that marriage.

Some of the men she had dated had run after discovering her connection to Andrei Yegorov. Others, like Martin, ultimately showed they were only interested in the wealth the Russian oligarch represented.

Fergus had made it obvious he had no interest in Andrei's money. He also knew exactly who Andrei was in her life, and Lev, and most especially her mother, and he had still kissed her and wanted to bite her arse.

He had sounded less than happy about that when he spoke to his brother, not just because of who she was, but because he sounded troubled by the attraction he felt to a woman so much younger than him.

As if that mattered.

Magnus was right. If the attraction was there, then age became inconsequential.

If that was true, how did she go about letting Fergus know that was how she felt?

Considering the reason the two of them had met ten years ago, however briefly, honesty was probably her best policy.

* * *

"Does your head still hurt?" Fergus prompted guardedly when the silence between them had become too charged for his comfort. "Do I need to call?—"

"No, my head doesn't still hurt," she said, cutting him off. "But I do have an ache." Her golden gaze remained steady on his.

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He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue before speaking. “Where do you ache?”

She unfastened the tie at the front of her sleep shorts, allowing the silky garment to fall down to her ankles before stepping out of them. “Right here.” She turned slightly so that the gorgeous curve of one of her bare bottom cheeks was visible. “Are you going to kiss it better?”

“I’m going to bite it first.” Fergus strode over to where she still stood near the doorway, before turning her fully away from him and falling to his knees.

That bared bottom, the pert one he had been coveting for the past two days, was now directly in front of him.

The warmth of Thea’s creamy skin was as smooth as silk and just as soft, Fergus discovered after individually cupping those globes in his hands.

His breathing hitched and then became labored as he squeezed those twin cheeks in his hands before bending forward slightly to sink his teeth into that delicious flesh.

“Ouch!” Thea turned to look at him, obviously surprised that he had carried out his stated desire to bite her arse.

“Delicious,” Fergus kissed where he had bitten before watching as his fingers dug into the smoothness of her skin. He squeezed and parted those two mounds to expose the shadowed entrance between them.

He had told Magnus that he had never had anal sex, and the truth was he had never been in the least interested in doing so.

Until now.

Now he couldn't stop his thoughts from imagining his dick buried between these perfect bottom cheeks. After he had stretched and lubricated that entrance, of course. The last thing he ever wanted to do was to hurt Thea.

TheaMorgan, he reminded himself.

Hell, he no longer cared who she was related to, who he was, or anything about their mutual past. He just wanted Thea. To lick and taste all of her.

To be able to do that, he needed access to all of her.

* * *

Thea gave a surprised squeak when Fergus stood up to spin her round to face him before placing his hands on her bottom and lifting her.

She instinctively wound her arms about his neck and her legs about his waist. "What— Oh," she acknowledged as Fergus carried her across the room, one of his arms sweeping everything off the desktop, before he placed her down on the now-uncluttered surface.

He kept his weight on his arms as he came down on top of her, then claimed her lips in a deep and hungry kiss.

Thea kissed him back, their tongues dueling, as the kiss grew hungrier still. Longer. Deeper. Out of control.

She was breathing hard and slightly dazed by the time Fergus raised his head to look at her.

“If you want me to stop, now is the time to tell me,” he warned even as he knelt between her legs.

Thea didn't reply. She didn't want him to stop. She wanted this. Wanted Fergus.

Instead, she watched him as his gaze became fixed between her thighs, and he slowly lowered his head. He was humming slightly as he rasped his tongue slowly along the length of her slit before that tongue twirled and licked her pulsing clitoris.

Thea's hips rose instinctively off the desk, seeking the pleasure of having that tongue press harder against that sensitive bud. His humming turned to a vibrating growl that reached deep inside her as he sucked her clitoris into his mouth, tongue raking it over and over again.

Her orgasm took her completely by surprise, throwing her into a maelstrom of sensations, all of them pleasurable, as Fergus licked and swallowed her release.

She tensed before becoming completely mindless when Fergus used that release to moisten his fingers before stroking them along and then against the sensitive entrance of her bottom.

Strange, Thea had never realized before now that her bottom was sensitive. But the moment Fergus's thumb pressed against that rosette, demanding entry, at the same time that his lips and tongue laved and sucked her clit, her body exploded in a second orgasm.

Thea could only stare up at him when he rose back to his feet to push up her camisole, his gaze devouring her bared breasts. He lowered his head to suck one of

her nipples into his mouth while one of his hands moved to caress and squeeze its twin.

His other hand, Thea acknowledged through the haze of two orgasms, and the third one building inside her, was wrapped around his bared and impressively thick and aroused cock as he pumped it to the same rhythm as he sucked on her nipple. Sometime during her second orgasm, he must have unfastened his jeans and released his engorged cock.

Seeing that large hand wrapped around and pumping that arousal was enough to hurtle Thea into her third orgasm.

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“You’re so beautiful,” Fergus groaned as he straightened, his gaze devouring every inch of her as his hand moved faster along his aroused length.

Thea gasped as his gaze settled between her thighs before his other hand moved to caress and press against her sensitive nub. She was too sensitive after three orgasms. Too?—

“Don’t move,” Fergus instructed gruffly as she tried to squirm away from those caressing fingers. “I need—” He gave a low groan as his release shot from the bulbous end of his cock, and rope after rope of his cum decorated Thea’s abdomen and breasts.

CHAPTERNINE

Thea gave a surreptitious glance in Fergus’s direction the following morning. He was sitting in the front of the SUV beside the man driving them to the private airfield just outside of Paris where the man had informed them the Wynter jet was waiting to take them back to England.

The other man was very tall and rugged, with lots of salt in his dark hair, and he wore a fitted blue suit with a white shirt and dark blue tie that did nothing to disguise his muscular arms and chest.

He had already been in the kitchen with Fergus when Thea came downstairs this morning and had introduced himself to her as Declan Quinn. The same man Fergus had told her was brilliant at his job and was going to be her personal bodyguard until the problem of her stalker was settled.

Declan appeared to be about the same age as Fergus, but the amount of salt in his hair made him appear older. He also had deep lines etched beside his shrewd and watchful blue eyes. Irish eyes, Thea would guess from his name and the slightly accented lilt she detected in his deep and gravelly voice.

There had been a dangerous stillness about Declan as he checked their surroundings before allowing Thea to leave Fergus's Paris home. He had also positioned himself so that she was fully protected when he opened one of the back doors of the black SUV for her to climb inside.

Declan gave every appearance of behaving like a crouching tiger about to pounce on its prey if it became necessary for him to protect her.

Thea also knew, having caught sight of it when she shook his hand after the introduction that, despite the law on carrying concealed weapons both in France and the UK, Declan was wearing a shoulder holster and had a gun hidden beneath his perfectly tailored suit jacket.

Fergus didn't seem to have brought any luggage of his own, and Thea could only assume that was because he already had clothes in his apartment in London. Thea had brought her own small suitcase into the vehicle with her, reluctant to let it out of her sight when it now also contained the pillowcase, not the pillow, obviously, which had been missing until yesterday.

She had been hurt but somehow not surprised when Fergus chose to climb into the front passenger seat of the black SUV parked outside, sitting beside Declan rather than in the back with her. The atmosphere between the two of them had been more than a little tense since Thea joined Fergus and Declan in the kitchen earlier.

She'd been alone when she woke up in Fergus's bed this morning. They had showered together before going to bed, Fergus holding her as she fell into a deep

sleep.

Thea hadn't thought too much of waking up alone at the time, knowing they were leaving Paris first thing this morning and that Fergus probably had a few personal things in need of his attention before they left.

It was only when she saw the remoteness of his expression, once she had joined him and Declan in the kitchen after she had showered and dressed in comfortable jeans and a T-shirt for traveling, that she'd had to accept that the expected familiarity between them simply wasn't there. The man could barely bring himself to even look at her.

It didn't help that Fergus's appearance was once again formal and businesslike in one of those tailored suits, charcoal gray this time, with a pale gray shirt and silver tie.

He had remained distant when he set out coffee and croissants for her breakfast, his voice lacking any real warmth.

Even then, Thea had tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, there was a third person present, and it probably wasn't a good idea to let one of his employees realize how personal their relationship now was.

Or, at least, it had seemed so to Thea. Fergus's distant behavior, as if none of the intimacy between them had happened, told her he didn't feel the same way about it.

That he perhaps wished it hadn't happened at all.

Leaving Thea with no choice but to adopt the same polite distance toward him as he had toward her.

Inwardly, she was hurt, of course. She didn't know what she had expected, but this

cold and distant Fergus certainly wasn't the same man who had made passionate love to her the previous night. The same man whose bed she had afterward shared for the night.

Fergus followed the same pattern on the flight back to England on the luxurious twenty-seater private jet, once again choosing to sit beside Declan rather than with her.

There had been three other men, all wearing formal suits, waiting for them when Declan drove the SUV over to the plane parked on the far side of the small airfield. All the men had greeted Fergus by name before nodding acknowledgment of Thea.

She guessed this was the rest of Declan's team.

The flight home was so tense and awkward for Thea that, although she had accepted Fergus's assistance in returning to England on this private jet rather than running afoul of her stalker for a second time by flying from a public airport, she knew she couldn't accept any further help from him.

Something she intended to make clear to him the moment she arrived safely back at her apartment.

Having a hostile Fergus protecting her, possibly a grudging one, was even worse than having no Fergus or protection at all.

He would probably argue against her dismissing him and his help. She already knew him well enough to understand he was a man who always liked to keep his word. But that was just too bad. Every part of him now screamed that he regretted what had happened the previous night, and that what he wanted most of all was to put distance between them.

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Much as that realization hurt her, and inwardly she just wanted to sit and cry, Thea refused to do so until she could be completely alone.

She now knew that coming to Paris and talking to Fergus at all had been a mistake on her part. Asking for his help had been an even bigger one. She'd never needed or asked for anyone's assistance before, and she didn't need or want this cold and distant Fergus's begrudging help now either.

"Whatever you've been thinking about the past few hours, I advise you not to waste any more of your time on it," Fergus told her as he sat beside her in the back of another black SUV on the drive to her apartment. Declan sat behind the wheel in front of Thea, a member of his team seated beside him.

A second black SUV followed behind them, the other two men inside.

"Declan and his team are staying in your life until this situation has been settled, and so am I," Fergus continued grimly.

"Really?" she challenged. "And in what world do you think I'd be willing to accept the help of a man who so obviously not only resents me but doesn't like me?"

"What the fuck!" A nerve pulsed in his clenched cheek as he turned to face her. "I don't resent or dislike you," he insisted.

She gave a scornful snort. "Your every word and action since I came downstairs this morning says differently."

He flicked a glance at Declan sitting behind the wheel. “Can we talk about this once we’re inside your apartment?”

Thea’s mouth tightened. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“What does that mean?”

She snorted. “That I’ve decided to take my chances and report this situation to the English police.”

* * *

Over Fergus’s dead body!

Or possibly Thea’s, if the police didn’t monitor this situation closely enough, and Fergus had no reason to believe they would.

Thea’s accusation of having a stalker in London—her claim that someone had broken into her apartment and stolen a pillow, one which had suddenly reappeared in her Paris hotel suite—wouldn’t be strong enough for the police to feel the need to give Thea 24/7 protection. The attack in Paris, while she was alone in that same hotel suite, came under another country’s jurisdiction.

Fergus released a heavy sigh. “Look, if for some reason you’ve decided you don’t like the idea of Declan guarding you, we can?—”

“I like Declan just fine,” Thea cut in icily before adding. “It’s you I don’t like.”

What the hell...!

Fergus glanced at the rearview mirror, only to find Declan looking straight back at

him with mocking blue eyes before the other man's gaze returned to the road ahead.

Bastard!

Fergus scowled before muttering. "You liked me just fine last night."

Her cheeks colored a fiery red. "And now I don't," she snapped. "I wonder why that is," she scorned before turning to look out the side window.

Fergus knew exactly why Thea was so angry with him, and he knew it was all his own fault.

But he had felt wrong-footed when Declan arrived at his house this morning before Fergus had a chance to go back upstairs and speak to Thea again.

Last night, making love with Thea, had been more momentous, a deeper intimacy, than Fergus had ever experienced before.

He'd had good sex in the past, the occasional mediocre sex too, unfortunately, despite all his efforts for it to be otherwise. But he'd never had the spectacular sex he'd experienced last night. And he knew a big part of the reason for that was because he felt an emotional connection to Thea that he'd never had with any other woman.

Something he had intended to tell her before they left Paris.

Then Declan had arrived, shortly followed by Thea coming downstairs before Fergus could take her the coffee and croissants he'd been preparing for her up to his bedroom.

Thea hadn't even looked at him as he introduced Declan to her, leading him to the conclusion she must regret last night's intimacy.

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After that, he had reacted defensively to what he felt was her rejection of both him and their lovemaking.

Hours later, he could see how his behavior made him look like a ten-year-old who, having sent a note to the girl in class that he fancied, had to watch as she threw that note into the bin before walking away.

He had not only behaved ridiculously, but badly. Brought about primarily, no doubt, by the fact that Fergus had never spent the whole night with any of the women he'd had sex with. Hell, he had never invited a woman into his house in Paris, let alone to his bedroom and his bed.

Magnus would laugh his head off if he knew how childish Fergus had responded to the situation. Especially when a more obvious explanation for Thea's earlier coolness was that she had felt just as disconcerted as he had by having a third person present when they greeted each other again for the first time after their intimacy and spending the night together in the same bed.

The truth was, it had taken every effort on Fergus's part not to take Thea in his arms and kiss the hell out of her the moment she walked into the kitchen. To devour and claim those lips that he had kissed so deeply the night before.

He had woken in the night, his cock once again hard and throbbing with need as it nestled between Thea's arse cheeks. His arm was draped possessively about her slender waist, anchoring her against him.

But he had forced himself not to wake her.

The last couple of weeks—hell, months, possibly even years, from what Thea had told him—had been stressful ones for her. More recently because she had been hit on the head the previous day and knocked unconscious.

His own needs be damned, Thea had been sleeping far too peacefully for him to want to wake her for his own selfish reasons. He was an adult, not some kid who allowed the needs of his body to dictate his actions.

He hadn't been able to fall back to sleep, though. Instead, he'd remained awake in the darkness, holding Thea and making all sorts of decisions and plans for the two of them he had no right making without her input. But the main decision he had made had been that he intended to remain in Thea's life for as long as she would allow him to do so.

The coldness of her expression now told him that she had already reached that point!

"We'll talk once we're inside your apartment," he said again as Declan parked the SUV outside the building where Thea obviously lived.

"I'm not inviting you up to my home," she told him.

"Thea—"

"My answer is no, Fergus," she reiterated. "Take off the child lock, Declan," she instructed evenly after trying to open the door and failing. "Don't look at Fergus for permission, just do it," she grated from between gritted teeth after the other man had done exactly that.

"Do as she says," Fergus instructed Declan, immediately followed by the sound of the child lock being released. "Fuck it!" he muttered as Thea thrust open the door beside her and stepped out onto the pavement, taking her small piece of luggage with

her.

Declan, on the same side of the vehicle as Thea, quickly followed her. Fergus and the other bodyguard stepped out onto the road.

“Shooter!” Declan shouted.

Fergus turned in time to see Declan wrap his arms around Thea, followed by the sound of two shots being fired and the two of them falling to the pavement.

For the briefest of seconds, the rest of Fergus’s life, without Thea in it, flashed in front of him.

Empty.

Barren of light.

And love...

CHAPTER TEN

“Both bullets missed the spine and vital organs, and we managed to remove them without causing any further damage,” the obviously tired surgeon informed them the moment she entered the waiting room.

The slightly bloodstained blue gown she wore and the mask tied about her neck said she had come straight from the theater to give them the good news.

“He’s already regained consciousness and is in the ICU,” the doctor continued. “But he’s insisting that he must speak to Mr. Wynter right now. I am allowing you two minutes,” she warned Fergus. “After that, I’m asking that you all leave and come

back in the morning.”

Thea remained numb inside as she watched Fergus depart with the surgeon.

Because Declan had beenshot.

Twice.

In the back.

Bullets they all knew, but so far no one had said out loud, had been meant for Thea.

If Declan hadn't wrapped his arms and body about her so tightly half a second before the shots were fired, she would have been the person the bullets hit. Maybe fatally, as she was so much smaller than Declan, and the bullets that had penetrated high up on his back would have hit her in the head.

Even as the two of them fell to the ground, Declan had rolled so that he was the one to hit the pavement hard, and not her.

At first, Thea had believed that the hissing sound Declan made as he landed was because the air had been knocked from his lungs on impact. It was only after Fergus helped her to stand and Declan rolled over onto his side, obviously in pain, that they realized he had been shot in the back.

She had seen people supposedly shot in TV programs, but reality was something else entirely. There was so much blood for one thing, soaking into the back of his blue suit jacket. The strained expression on Declan's pale and previously stoic face had told her how much pain he was really in.

Thea had been in shock ever since, barely aware of the speedy drive to the hospital with Declan lying in the back of the SUV. Or the long hours since as they waited here for the news that he had survived the surgery.

She had been vaguely aware of meeting two other men during that time. Men who

looked a lot like Fergus. He'd introduced one of them as his twin, Magnus, and the other as his cousin, Rufus. The two men had taken it in turns to stay with them for several hours, bringing coffee and food to anyone who wanted it.

Declan's team had waited with them, waiting for news of their friend and colleague, and refusing to leave until they knew Declan was out of danger. In fact, several other Wynter Security employees had turned up at the hospital too, all wanting news of Declan.

Those employees had now all filed out of the room with Fergus, but several had commented that they would be coming back in the morning.

Fergus had tried talking to Thea several times during the past six hours, as had the police when they arrived to take their statements on the incident. But she was feeling too numb to respond to any of them.

That numbness was starting to fade now that she knew Declan was going to live. Exhaustion from the overload of adrenaline and emotion was quickly taking its place.

Random drive-by shootings, which the police seemed to be classing this incident as, and Fergus hadn't contradicted them, didn't occur in the UK. Well...they happened more nowadays than they used to, as did knife attacks, but still...

Declan had been shot. Twice.

No matter how many times Thea said that to herself, she still couldn't quite believe it. Bullets she had no doubt had been meant for her. The shooter had been waiting outside her apartment building, after all.

"Ready to go?" Fergus prompted gently, having come back into the waiting room without Thea realizing.

He looked as tired as she felt after spending all these long hours at the hospital. There were dark shadows under his eyes, his face was pale, and his hair looked as if he had been running his fingers through it for hours. Which Thea knew he had.

“Is Declan going to...to be okay?” Tears blurred her vision at the possibility he might not be.

“Yes,” Fergus assured.

“But—”

“I’ve instructed some of our men to remain here overnight as a precaution.”

Except—there was that elephant in the room again—they all knew those two bullets hadn’t been meant for Declan.

Who hated her so much that they had been willing to shoot her in broad daylight?

Thea had absolutely no idea. None.

She stood up and immediately dismissed how stiff and aching she felt after sitting on the hard chair for hours. Declan had been shot protecting her, so a little discomfort on her part was totally irrelevant.

“How was he?” she questioned as Fergus helped her on with her jacket.

“A bit groggy, but otherwise glad to have the bullets removed.”

“Was there a reason he needed to see you so urgently?” she prompted as he held the door open for her to go out into the hospital corridor.

Fergus nodded. “He wanted to give me a description of the shooter as well as the distinctive tattoos he saw on the other man’s neck.”

Her eyes widened. “He had time to notice something like that?”

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Fergus gave a rueful smile. “Like me, Declan is ex-Special Forces. He knows that those details count.”

“Who do you both think was responsible?”

Fergus’s expression became closed. “We’re still looking into it.”

“We?” The two of them walked side by side down the hallway and out the doors to the outside.

Thea felt momentarily disoriented by the obviously late afternoon sunshine. The hours they had spent in the hospital had felt surreal, a time out of time, and it was a shock to realize the sun was still shining.

“Magnus and Rufus, but mainly Linus, are checking into it.” Fergus unlocked and opened the passenger door of the SUV for her.

As she climbed inside, Thea realized it was a different SUV than the one they had arrived in. That one had blood all over the back seat. Declan’s blood. One of the men in the Wynter family must have taken it away sometime during the past six hours and left this one in its place.

Thea hadn’t met Linus yet, but she knew he was the tech guy for the company, so he would probably be the one checking any security cameras in the area. “Do you think it could have been Lev or my stalker?” she pressed.

“I believe it’s one of them, yes,” Fergus bit out as he started the engine before driving

the vehicle out of the parking area. “Your stalker, because he’s already shown he can be violent when he knocked you unconscious in Paris. But Lev Yegorov is more likely to have armed men working for him. Also, the tattoos Declan described seeing on the guy’s neck were very distinctive. I believe we’ll find that he’s one of Yegorov’s men.”

Her eyes widened. “Lev tried to have me killed?”

“It’s a possibility,” Fergus grated.

“But why?” She frowned her puzzlement.

He shrugged. “We’ll need him to tell us that.”

“But you think the shooter’s tattoos will confirm whether he worked for Lev?”

He nodded. “If they’re gang or organized crime related, yes, and we think they are. I need to make a few phone calls referencing the information Declan gave me, but I believe we should have an answer to that question within a few hours.”

“Then what?”

His jaw tightened. “Then we have to decide what we’re going to do about it.”

“Do about it?”

“Yes.” The challenging expression on Fergus’s face told her he wasn’t going to add anything more to that.

Thea wasn’t sure she was up to hearing any more. It had been a stressful few weeks before the unprovoked shooting this morning. She simply didn’t have anything left in

reserve to deal with any more shocks.

* * *

“Have I been asleep for long?”

Fergus looked at the beautiful woman lying beneath the covers in the bed in one of the spare bedrooms in his apartment.

Thea had been exhausted by the time they arrived here a couple of hours ago. Thankfully, too much so to bother arguing with him about where they went after leaving the hospital. Or protest when he suggested she take a nap before dinner.

If she had questioned coming here, Fergus would have explained that he believed it was far safer for her to be twenty floors up, in his penthouse home, than it was for her to go back to her own apartment. The break-in a few days ago told him that her apartment building had insufficient security to keep her safe.

Fergus had made a couple of calls to members of his family once Thea was asleep, plus another one to Nikolai Volkov. The latter might be an arrogant bastard, but he was also more likely to be able to identify the distinctive tattoos Declan had described on the shooter's neck.

After that, Fergus hadn't been able to stop himself from coming back to the spare bedroom to sit in the chair he had pulled up beside the bed. He'd needed to sit and watch Thea breathe. To reassure himself that she was still alive.

Which she wouldn't be if Declan hadn't moved as quickly as he had.

Fergus's blood ran cold every time he thought of those two bullets piercing Thea's head, knowing she would have died instantly.

Fergus knew, in that stark moment, that any hopes and dreams he might have envisaged for his future would have died with her.

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Because, despite having known her for only a matter of days, he had fallen deeply and irrevocably in love with Thea Morgan.

Not just because she was beautiful. Even though she was. But because Thea's soul was equally as beautiful and honest and true to her principles.

Many people would have been tempted to give up their job and live life large and full with the fifty million pounds her mother had left her. Not Thea. To her, it was dirty money, and she wanted nothing to do with it.

Fergus felt sure those principles had to have come from her father. That they had been lovingly instilled in Thea during the first eight years of her life.

Fergus had no doubt that it had been those eight years of her father's unconditional love that had helped Thea to withstand the years of indifference from her mother that had followed his death.

Thea was a survivor.

A warm, loving, and beautiful survivor, who lived by her own moral code of kindness and honesty.

Fuck, it made Fergus's heart burst with a warmth of emotion just to look at her.

"Fergus?" she prompted at his silence.

He reached out to gently stroke his fingers down her cheek. "It's a little after seven

o'clock in the evening."

"Is Declan..."

"He's fine," Fergus instantly reassured. "More than fine, apparently," he added with a rueful smile. "I called to check on him an hour ago, and the nurse in charge of the ICU told me he's growling at them all because he wants a steak for his dinner and not the soup and pureed food they tried to serve him."

Thea released a relieved sigh as she pulled herself up into a sitting position. "Thank God." She swallowed, her gaze focused on her fingers as they plucked at the raised pattern on the duvet cover. "Maybe now isn't the time, but I really need to know this: why were you so...off toward me this morning?"

Fergus had been expecting this question ever since he'd realized how ridiculous his behavior had been after Declan arrived in Paris this morning. "That's a bigger conversation, and I think you need to eat dinner before we discuss it any further."

Her lashes lowered over those beautiful golden eyes. "If that's what you would prefer."

"It is." He stood. "I'll go and cook us a couple of steaks while you take a refreshing shower and dress in clean clothes."

"Now you're being mean!" she protested with a weak smile.

Fergus sobered. "I'm really not. Truth is, I owe Declan a great debt for putting your life before his own."

Thea eyed him quizzically. "I think I'm the one who owes him that debt, not you."

“I disagree.”

“But—”

“As I said, you’re rested now, and we can have a more in-depth conversation after you’ve eaten. Okay?” he prompted gently.

She gave a slow nod. “Okay.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You said we would have the ‘bigger conversation’ after we’ve eaten,” Thea reminded, the two of them having remained seated at the breakfast bar after putting their used dinner plates in the dishwasher.

She hadn’t been able to eat all of the steak and jacket potato Fergus had cooked for her, and there was still some of the salad she had made left in the bowl, but she really couldn’t eat any more. Her stomach was still churning from the horrific events of the day.

It was also still very much a novelty to her to have a man cook a meal for her. She and Martin had dated for a few months, but he had never once offered to cook for her.

It had been nice puttering about in the kitchen together. Something that had felt normal and domesticated after the tension of the past few weeks.

Thea had still been too numb to notice when they arrived earlier, but her walk through the apartment on her way to the kitchen had shown her that Fergus’s London apartment was just as opulent as his Parisian home.

The shades of blue and gray decor throughout, along with the dark furnishings, were

more modern than those in his house in Paris, but the overall effect was still one of wealth and comfort.

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She'd also seen the spectacular view of London from the floor-to-ceiling windows in the main sitting room when she passed by.

Her breath had caught in her throat the moment she'd seen Fergus again. His dark hair was tousled and damp, probably from taking his own shower. He was now dressed as casually as she was, in a clean black T-shirt and dark jeans.

As Thea had thought earlier, he did keep more of his clothes here.

"You want the whole unvarnished truth, hm?" he teased her now.

"Yes," she answered instantly.

He sobered. "Then last night, with you, was the singular most powerfully intimate experience of my life. I was thrown off-kilter by it. Then Declan arrived before I had a chance to come to terms with what the hell was going on."

Thea swallowed. "Going on...?"

He nodded. "The two of us making love. Sleeping together. Waking up with you still in my arms, in the middle of the night, and then again this morning."

Her frown was puzzled. "Isn't that what usually happens when women stay the night with you?"

He shook his head. "I don't invite women to my house, let alone ask them to spend the night in my bed with me there."

“Okay,” she acknowledged slowly, not sure what that meant exactly.

But it sounded as if Fergus was still slightly surprised that he had allowed her to do all those things.

He nodded. “I want to spend as many more nights with you, sharing that same intimacy, as you’ll let me. I know I behaved like a complete dick this morning,” he continued when Thea would have spoken. “But could you try to maybe cut me a little slack? I might be forty-two years old, but I have absolutely no previous experience with what is currently happening between the two of us. None,” he repeated fiercely.

Thea grimaced. “Suave and sophisticated left the building?” she said, attempting to make light of the situation.

Fergus gave the hint of a smile at her reference to having overheard part of his conversation with his twin the previous evening. “Pretty much, yes. I know how to navigate a hookup or a date that I believe will result in the two of us having sex. But what’s happening between the two of us is completely new to me.”

She eyed him guardedly. “And exactly what do you think is happening between us?”

“An earthquake of momentous proportions. At least, that’s what it feels like. You, the two of us together last night especially, have shaken my world.” His voice had lowered huskily. “It’s still shaking.”

She looked at him searchingly for several long seconds, seeing only sincerity in his expression, along with the bewilderment he had spoken of feeling. “What happens when it stops shaking?”

“I have a feeling my world is going to be forever changed.”

“That sounds ominous.”

His lips curved into a rueful smile. “What I’m trying to explain, and maybe not succeeding, is that I was starting to accept those changes. But I wasn’t quite there yet when Declan arrived this morning, and you and I were no longer alone to talk about this in private.”

Thea eyed him warily, unsure what he meant by that, but she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. “Okay. I get that. But it still hurt to have you be so distant toward me. Perhaps for the immediate future, you could maybe think about not behaving like a monumental dick again? It’s not very nice.”

He grinned at her description. “I can do that.”

“I hope so, because this morning was miserable.”

“For me too,” he agreed.

“Good!”

“Vicious. I like that,” he admired.

“You’ve really never had a woman spend the night at your house with you before last night?” she prompted curiously.

“Never.”

“Wow.”

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Fergus nodded. “It’s a little disconcerting, to say the least,” he admitted. “I thought I had it all figured out, that living alone, with the occasional hookup at a hotel or going back to a woman’s apartment with her, was how my life was and always would be. Then bam, you suddenly appeared, and everything I thought I knew or wanted for my life just fell apart.”

It wasn’t a declaration of love, and it was far too soon for Thea to expect one from him, or for her to make one to him. But it was an admission that Fergus was just as deeply affected by whatever was growing between them as she was.

Thea decided that she would do what he asked and, for the moment, cut him some slack. Initially, by changing the subject. “Are you any further forward in knowing who the shooter was?”

“Not yet.” He shrugged. “I’m still waiting for my friend to get back to me on the distinctive tattoos Declan saw on the man’s neck.”

She raised her brows. “You have a friend who would know the significance of gang or organized-crime-related tattoos?”

“If they’re Russian ones. And yes,” he sighed, “I believe I do have to class Nikolai Volkov as a friend,” he added dryly.

“You don’t sound very sure...”

“I’m sure he considers me as his friend. I’m just not sure how I feel about classing the sovietnik to the pakhan of the London bratva as being my friend.”

“What is a sovietnik?”

“The second to thepakhanin the Russian bratva.”

“Oh.”

He gave a derisive huff. “Nikolai’s surname of Volkov means wolf in Russian, and believe me, he more than lives up to his name,” he stated dryly.

She frowned. “I’m sure you told me you didn’t associate with Russian gangsters.”

He smiled ruefully. “I very much doubt Nikolai would call himself a Russian gangster. We met through a third party, and now none of us can shake him. Nikolai is a powerful and complicated man,” Fergus added when Thea just stared at him. “But once he considers you his friend, it seems you become so for life.”

“How did you even meet a member of the bratva?” Thea had heard of the Russian bratva, along with the London and Irish mobs and the Italian Mafia. More recently, the Albanian mafia and the Romanian one had come to London too. But she didn’t personally know anyone who belonged to those organizations, nor did she know anyone else who did.

It seemed she did now!

“We met after Nikolai did something amazing for my cousin Rufus,” Fergus explained.

“That sounds interesting,” Thea prompted when he added nothing further.

“It is.” Fergus nodded. “But it’s Rufus’s story to tell, not mine.”

She nodded, totally respecting the other man's privacy. "But, despite your previous comment on the subject, you're actually buddies with the second to the pakhan of the London Russian bratva?" she mused.

He winced. "I appear to be."

"And he's going to be able to tell you whether the man who was waiting at my apartment building?—"

"Declan said there were two men, but only one shot him."

She nodded. "But you think Nikolai Volkov can tell you whether those men are associates, or possibly family, to Lev Yegorov, just from the tattoos on their neck?"

"I believe he can." He nodded. "I very much doubt that Nikolai likes or approves of Yegorov, anyway. He doesn't have a lot of respect for the oligarchs who stripped the wealth out of his country and then fled Russia to live in luxury in the West."

"Nikolai didn't do that himself?"

"Absolutely not." Fergus chuckled. "I don't know anything about Nikolai's background, but he's too much of a fighter to have grown up in luxury. He's also been in the Russian bratva all his adult life and is definitely not an oligarch. I'm pretty sure Lev has been on Nikolai's radar since the other man moved permanently to London, and that he's just waiting for Yegorov to step out of line so he can do something about it." He shrugged. "I think he'll definitely consider Lev's unwanted and persistent pursuit of you, then trying to have you shot?—"

"If he did," Thea put in quickly, still having a little trouble accepting that someone had wanted to kill her.

“If he did, Nikolai will definitely consider it stepping out of line. Nikolai is married, with children, and he’s very protective when it comes to all women and children.”

Thea swallowed. “What will he do to Lev if it was him?”

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“I have no intention of ever asking him that, and if you ever meet him, I advise you not to do so either,” Fergus stated.

Thea gave a dismissive snort. “I can’t think of any circumstances under which I would ever meet Nikolai Volkov.”

“Maybe not,” Fergus conceded. “But I have a feeling Lev Yegorov might cease to be any sort of a problem for you, or anyone else, if Nikolai discovers he ordered men to carry out a shooting in a public place with a woman as the target.”

She swallowed. “He sounds...scary.”

“If Nikolai considers someone an enemy, then he can be scary,” Fergus acknowledged. “Very much so.”

Thea felt as if she had somehow entered a parallel universe.

One in which conversations about Russian oligarchs and the Russian bratva now seemed to feature strongly.

* * *

“Have I groveled enough for you to now forgive me for this morning?” Fergus teased when Thea fell silent, obviously lost in her own thoughts. Unsurprisingly. This was a lot to take on board.

She drew back to give him an incredulous look. “You think this conversation was you

groveling?”

He eyed her warily. “It wasn’t?”

“Definitely not,” she assured him with a chuckle. “You really need to get up to speed on dating a woman if you don’t want to find yourself groveling every other minute of the day.”

He eyed her curiously. “Is that what we’re doing, dating?”

Thea returned his gaze with uncertainty in her golden eyes. “Is it?”

“Hell, yes,” Fergus instantly assured. “Exclusively,” he added as he reached out to take one of her hands into his.

“Does that work both ways?”

“Also hell, yes.”

A blush now colored Thea’s cheeks. “Okay, then.”

“Can I kiss you now?”

“Have I ever said you couldn’t?”

No, she hadn’t, but Fergus hadn’t been sure that was still the case after the way he had behaved earlier today.

He might not completely understand what was happening to him, but one thing he knew for certain was that he wanted Thea to remain in his life for the foreseeable future. Even the thought of not being with her was enough to cause his chest to

tighten in a painful way.

He lifted his hand to curl his fingers about her chin to hold her gently in place as he leaned forward to place his lips against hers. Softly at first, then harder and deeper, after her lips had parted and she began to kiss him back.

Fergus immediately deepened the kiss, thoroughly exploring the heat of her mouth.

Kissing Thea was like losing himself in a cloud of heat and sensation, making Fergus aware of everything. The softness of her lips. Her taste. The unique perfume that was so completely Thea. The heat of her body as she pressed against his chest.

Fergus had no idea how long they kissed. Nor did he care, too lost in those sensations and the swirl of emotions that were quickly taking over his soul.

Thea was becoming his soul.

His heart.

And he couldn't live without his heart and soul.

Nor did he want to.

CHAPTERTWELVE

Thea was the one to bring a halt to their kissing long minutes later. But she couldn't bring herself to completely move away from Fergus, instead resting her forehead against his as their ragged breaths intermingled.

Because she had realized in the last few minutes that this man now owned her. Both body and soul.

And Thea still didn't completely trust her own emotions or that the two of them had a future together.

Fergus was helping her right now, and she was very grateful for that assistance, but a fierce physical reaction and sex—even of the “singularly the most powerfully intimate experience” kind—did not a relationship make. Thea would do well to remember that before she allowed herself to become even more emotionally involved with Fergus.

It was a little late for that, when she believed she had already fallen in love with him!

But at least she hadn't told Fergus that. This was going to hurt badly enough when their relationship came to an end, without Thea having to suffer that humiliation.

She pulled away completely when Fergus's cell phone, which he'd left on one of the worktops while they ate, began to ring.

It had pinged a couple of times to alert him of incoming messages as the two of them

kissed, but Fergus had chosen to ignore them.

He was ignoring its ringing now too.

“Shouldn’t you get that?” Thea prompted.

“No,” he bit out tersely. “Seeing people scrolling through social media on their cell phones, or worse, actually answering calls, when they are eating with other people is one of my pet hates,” he explained when Thea raised questioning brows. “It’s bloody rude and gives me indigestion.”

“Except when it’s Angel,” she reminded.

“Angel is the exception to that rule. She always will be. She’s special, and not just to me, but to the whole family. Besides, we weren’t eating.”

“I was only teasing,” she apologized.

He glared at the cell phone when the caller chose to ring off rather than leave a message.

He turned back to Thea. “Angel and Sapphie, her mother, had a lot of shit to put up with before Magnus met and married them. And I do mean he married both of them, because he adopted Angel as his own on their wedding day.”

“That’s really nice,” Thea admired.

He nodded. “I don’t—” He broke off as his phone began to ring again.

“It could be Nikolai calling you back about the tattoos,” Thea reasoned.

“It probably is,” Fergus acknowledged. “But I don’t want to talk to or see anyone else until I know the two of us are good.” He lifted his hand to once again gently stroke her cheek.

Fergus’s phone went abruptly silent before it started to ring for a third time. “I really think you need to answer that. It seems to be somewhat urgent.” She tensed. “Maybe Declan had a relapse? Or?—”

“It’s Nikolai,” Fergus assured after picking up the phone and looking at the screen for the caller ID.

“Then you should definitely answer it.” She doubted many people ignored a call from the sovietnik of the Russian bratva.

Fergus looked at her. “Are we good?”

“Yes.” For now, at any rate, Thea told herself inwardly. She had no idea what would happen between them once this situation had been settled.

“Fine.” He nodded before taking the call. His expression instantly darkened. “What? No! Nikolai? Arrogant fucker!” He held the cell phone away from him to look at the screen. “Bastard cut me off,” he muttered fiercely as he slammed the phone down on the breakfast bar. “Nikolai is downstairs and wants to come up—” He broke off as they heard the sound of the elevator doors opening out in the hallway. “How the hell did get up here, let alone so quickly...”

The answer to that was obvious when, seconds later, two men, not one, walked into the kitchen.

“I met Nikolai downstairs and invited him to come up in the elevator with me.” Despite his light brown hair and hazel eyes, the younger of the two men, who had just

spoken, looked enough like Fergus, facially, for Thea to guess this was Linus, the youngest Wynter brother.

Whoever he was, he obviously had the code and whatever other security was necessary to allow himself and Nikolai Volkov up to Fergus's apartment.

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Thea's gaze moved to the man standing beside him.

A man she knew, in view of the brief telephone conversation he'd had with Fergus just now, had to be Nikolai Volkov.

Whatever Thea had expected the sovietnik of the Russian bratva to look like, it wasn't this tall, muscular, blond-haired, and urbanely confident man, probably aged in his mid to late forties.

His handsome face was all angles, with cheekbones so sharp, they looked as if they could cut glass.

His short hair, no doubt expensively cut and styled, was such a pale blond that the strands of gray were almost invisible.

A couple of inches over six feet tall, Nikolai somehow managed to appear taller and more intimidating than that in the perfectly tailored dark gray suit, white shirt, and silver tie.

All colors, Thea realized when her gaze returned to his angular and handsome face, that complemented his pale and coldly piercing gray eyes.

His narrowed eyes swept briefly around the kitchen, taking in his surroundings, before that wolfish gaze finally settled on Thea. "Miss Morgan, I presume." It was a statement rather than a question. "The stepdaughter of Andrei Yegorov and the stepsister of Lev Yegorov." Again, it was a statement, not a question, with no inflection in his voice to say whether or not he liked or knew either of the other

Russian men.

“Nikolai—”

“It’s okay, Fergus,” Thea assured him warmly when he would have interceded, the coolness of her gaze continuing to meet the Russian’s challenging one as she stood up. “Yes, I have the misfortune to be both those things, Mr. Volkov. But I have always refused to let my relatives, especially the ones I’m not related to by choice, define who and what I am.”

“And who and what are you?” Volkov challenged.

Thea had a feeling this man already knew exactly who and what she was. That he always knew everything about anyone he intended interacting with.

Her chin rose. “I’m a hardworking teacher who’s just trying to get by in life. Something that’s proving a little difficult right now because of outside influences beyond my control. One thing I’m decidedly not is a member of the Russian mafia.”

“Thea—”

“I much prefer a woman with spirit, Fergus,” Volkov drawled with obvious amusement before turning back to Thea. “We prefer the word *bratva* rather than mafia,” he corrected her gently. “And I already knew of your dislike for your deceased mother’s husband and stepson.”

“Then why?—”

“I wanted to gauge what manner of young woman you are for myself,” the Russian said without apology. “I am very protective when it comes to the people I consider my friends.”

She nodded. "And Fergus is your friend."

Volkov's lips curved into a smile. "Much to his annoyance, yes."

Linus, the youngest man in the room, was openly grinning as he listened to their exchange.

"Except, of course, when he needs my help to protect his woman," the Russian continued, his voice hardening. "Then, it seems, I have my uses."

Color blazed in Thea's cheeks, and she couldn't even look at Fergus. "I'm not Fergus's woman!"

"Oh, but you are, Miss Morgan, and now that I have met you, I understand why." Volkov unfastened his suit jacket before making himself comfortable on one of the stools on the other side of the breakfast bar. "Do you mind if I help myself to the salad?" He used one of the serving forks to pierce a tomato. "My own dinner has been delayed because someone asked me to seek out information I was told was needed urgently." He gave Fergus a pointed glance as he chewed.

"I thought you would call me with the information, not make a personal visit," Fergus defended.

"You ignored my messages and calls," Nikolai Volkov reminded coolly.

Thea didn't know whether to be amused by this Russian's calm arrogance or terrified of him.

Either way, she had known from that very first glance that the watchful Nikolai Volkov was a very dangerous man.

A predator.

A wolf.

* * *

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Fergus had never wanted to hit someone on their arrogant nose quite as much as he now did Nikolai Volkov.

The bastard was enjoying himself far too much. At their—but mainly his—expense.

Thank God, Thea didn't seem in the least in awe of the mocking Russian bastard.

The opposite, in fact. Her gaze was amused as she steadily returned Nikolai's stare.

Fergus had never experienced jealousy before he met the adult Thea, but he was definitely feeling that emotion now in regard to the slightly older Nikolai.

The other man might be happily married, but he was also handsome as fuck, and Nikolai also knew how to turn on the charm when he felt like it. Now that he had decided he liked Thea, that charm was very much in evidence.

Linus was grinning at them all like a fucking loon, obviously enjoying this situation immensely.

His brother held up “don't look at me like that” hands when Fergus glowered his displeasure at him.

Fergus turned back to Nikolai. “Did you find anything about the tattoos I described in my message?” he prompted briskly.

Having finished eating what salad had been left in the bowl, the Russian turned on the stool to look at him. “They were, as you and Declan thought, the loyalty markings of

the men employed as Lev Yegorov's bodyguards. And yes, now that I have finished the salad, I would very much like a cup of coffee, thank you for asking," he added lightly.

Fergus glared his frustration, knowing the other man's pointed remark was meant to make him aware of how lacking his manners had been since the other man arrived. After all, he had asked for Nikolai's help, not the other way about.

"Hi, Thea." Linus, obviously tired of being ignored, now stepped forward to thrust his hand out toward her. "I'm Linus, Fergus's much younger brother."

Fergus scowled. "Six years isn't much younger."

"Well, it's a lot closer to twenty-four than forty-two is," Linus taunted.

Fucker!

"Nice to meet you, Linus." Thea shook his hand briefly. "I'll make us all some coffee," she offered. "I worked as a barista to help me through my years at university," she added chattily as she poured the coffee beans into the top of the machine and then poured the filtered water into the reservoir. "But then, with your skills, I'm guessing the two of you already knew that." She turned on the coffee machine before turning to give both Linus and Nikolai a pointed glance.

Linus nodded. "Guilty."

"I also know that you did so because you refused to accept any financial help from your stepfather," Nikolai confirmed, completely unabashed by the fact he'd obviously done more than investigate the origin of the tattoos Fergus had asked him to. "But does Fergus also know that it was due to you that your mother dropped her attempt to blackmail him ten years ago?" he added conversationally.

Fergus's eyes widened, and he could tell by the way Thea's gaze became accusing as she looked at the Russian that what Nikolai had just said was the truth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Did you really do that?" Fergus prompted Thea, a frown lowering his brow.

She shrugged as if the subject was of little importance. "I'd rather not?—"

"I spoke to Jessica Morgan's lawyer a short time ago." Nikolai ignored Thea's glare. "Once I had explained my interest, he very kindly told me exactly why Jessica Morgan backed off."

Fergus guessed "explained my interest" meant something far more sinister. Lawyers didn't just go around breaking their clients' confidentiality arbitrarily. Especially at seven o'clock at night.

But the fact that Nikolai had done so successfully with Jessica Morgan's lawyer was testament to the fear and awe in which all of London's residents held the Russian Wolf.

"He remembered Jessica Morgan and her daughter very well," Nikolai continued mildly. "He told me that Mrs. Morgan's daughter had told him you couldn't have been the father of her unborn child because Jessica Morgan was incapable of having any more children after she gave birth to Thea. He also told me that he had agreed to find someone to represent Thea if she chose to challenge her mother's claims in a court of law."

Thea continued to stare at him. "Those were private conversations..."

Nikolai nodded. "Indeed they were, but they are also ones that your mother's lawyer

felt he could confide in me.”

“No doubt threatening him helped,” Fergus muttered.

“No doubt,” the Russian drawled, unabashed. “But it is also the truth, is it not?” He looked at Thea.

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Her throat moved as she swallowed. “I couldn’t allow her to continue blackmailing Fergus when I knew everything my mother said was a lie.”

“More so even than Thea realized, hm, Fergus?” Nikolai prompted.

“What does he mean...?” Thea turned to ask Fergus.

“Yes, Fergus, what do I mean?” the Russian taunted.

Fergus glared at the other man. “How the fuck do you know these things?”

“I have informants everywhere,” Nikolai revealed without apology.

“Not in my fucking bed, you don’t.”

“No,” the Russian conceded. “But I do have eyes and ears everywhere else.”

Fergus winced as he looked at Thea. “Your mother and I never had a physical relationship.”

“But...” She moved to perch on the side of one of the bar stools, as if she might sway and fall if she didn’t. “She said... Why didn’t you?”

“Because I realized on our first date that Jessica was nothing more than a self-centered gold-digger.”

“Tell her the rest,” Nikolai encouraged.

Fergus released a frustrated sigh before continuing, knowing that if he didn't, Nikolai would do it for him. "At the time, I thought our second dinner together was a chance meeting. We were both eating alone at the same restaurant and decided to eat together instead. When it happened again a week later, I realized I was being played. I only agreed to sit with her that time so that I could tell her, in privacy, not to 'accidentally' bump into me again. The only reason I accompanied her when she received the call about you being rushed to hospital with suspected appendicitis was so that she could reach your side as quickly as possible. I had no idea until then that she even had a child, let alone how old you were."

"I... She... She definitely told me the two of you were dating." Thea's cheeks were flushed.

With discomfort or embarrassment? Fergus wondered. Neither of which she should be feeling, when she had done nothing wrong. The opposite, from the sound of it.

"Not after that first time, no," he told Thea gently.

"The two of you never slept—had sex together?"

"No."

"So how did she think she could accuse you of— Never mind," she dismissed in a heavy voice. "My mother was obviously more delusional than I thought she was." She shook her head. "Until the day she died, she let me believe I was the reason you had walked away from her."

"What!" Fergus stared at her.

She released a sigh before explaining. "I'm not sure my mother ever wanted children. But my father certainly did, and I was always closer to him than I was her. I don't

think my mother liked that either. Probably a jealousy thing, but I can't be sure. I know she never seemed to particularly like me, but after my dad died, things became even more strained between my mother and me. She wasn't exactly neglectful, but she only did the bare minimum to ensure social services were never called in."

"Bitch," Fergus muttered under his breath.

Thea shot him a rueful glance. "After a while, her disinterest didn't bother me. Mainly because I realized you can't miss something you've never had. But what she tried to do to you was... I couldn't just sit back and allow her to blackmail you when I knew it was all a lie." Thea huffed. "She never forgave me."

Fergus could easily imagine how Thea's bravery had infuriated her mother. Not for the first time, Fergus was glad Jessica Morgan was already dead.

Nikolai nodded. "It is my belief, and one shared by her lawyer, that your mother believed Fergus would pay her off rather than risk the scandal of the situation appearing in the newspapers."

"And instead, Thea threatened to reveal the truth, and Jessica had to back off without receiving any financial payoff from me." Fergus was still totally stunned by the fact it now seemed Thea's threats to her mother were the reason Jessica had dropped her lawsuit against him. "The information from the lawyer I understand, but how the hell do you know those other, more personal, things?" he demanded of the Russian.

Nikolai shrugged. "London is my city. Nothing happens within its boundaries that I do not know about. Or I cannot access information on if I need to."

Fergus scowled. "You really are one scary fucker."

"Thank you." Nikolai nodded as if he had just been paid the highest compliment. And

maybe to him, he had. “I believe the coffee is now ready, Miss Morgan.” He smiled at her.

Thea didn’t look at Fergus again—deliberately so?—as she moved to pour Nikolai a coffee before placing the cup in front of him.

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She then crossed the kitchen to take a jug of milk from the refrigerator before picking up the sugar bowl and bringing them over to the Russian too before returning to pour three more cups of coffee and placing them on the breakfast bar.

She did all that without saying a word.

Probably because she was as surprised by Nikolai's information as Fergus was. Not for the same reason, obviously. After all, she had known what she'd done to stop Jessica, and because of it, she had been the brunt of her mother's ire for the years that followed.

Fergus's surprise at Thea's courage in standing up to her mother was now fading. Enough so that he deeply regretted being the cause of Jessica's further ire toward her daughter. Although it sounded as if the older woman had never been particularly warm toward Thea.

As for how easily Nikolai had learned about these things...

There was a reason, other than the deep and loyal friendship that existed between Nikolai and hispakistan, that Nikolai was sovietnik to the head of the Russian bratva in London. As Nikolai had just stated, nothing happened in his city that he didn't know about.

"Did you ever regret what you did for me, Thea?" Fergus now prompted.

She shook her head. "My mother had set her sights on having you as her second husband, along with all your millions, and when that failed to come to fruition it

became obvious she had decided to blackmail you instead.”

Which, Fergus realized, didn’t answer the question he had just asked her. “And?” he prompted.

“And so, no, I don’t regret exposing her for the liar she was. The thing about bullies, as I’ve had reinforced since I became a teacher, is that they back off if challenged. I tell my students they should ignore bullies and never resort to violence. That the bully will soon become bored if they do. But the truth is that challenging them works as a far quicker and more efficient deterrent, basically because, at heart, they’re all cowards.”

It still seemed incredible that fourteen-year-old Thea had challenged her own mother and forced Jessica to back off trying to blackmail Fergus. Even knowing what that betrayal would do to their already-strained relationship.

“We’ll talk about this again later, okay?” He touched her arm gently.

Her gaze lowered from meeting his. “Okay.”

“As you seem to know so much, perhaps you can tell us who Thea’s stalker is?” Fergus now challenged the Russian.

“This coffee is delicious, Miss Morgan,” Nikolai murmured appreciatively after taking a sip of the black, unsweetened brew.

She gave him a wry smile. “Please call me Thea.”

He nodded. “And you should call me Nikolai. I have a feeling we will see a lot more of each other in the coming years.” He aimed a mocking glance in Fergus’s direction.

Fucker, Fergus mentally accused for the second time in minutes, but to Nikolai this time rather than his brother.

“Will you just answer the damn question?” he snapped at the older man.

“I believe Linus has that particular piece of information.” Nikolai glanced at the younger man.

“Well?” Fergus demanded of his silently watching brother.

Linus gave Thea an apologetic smile before revealing, “Fergus asked me to look into a man named Martin Hayes. When I did, I discovered that he had taken a train to Paris four days ago. When he arrived, he booked into a small boutique hotel several streets away from George V, where Thea was staying?—”

“Very nice,” Nikolai approved.

Linus nodded acknowledgment before his smile faded. “He immediately began to stalk Thea.”

* * *

“Martin is my stalker...?” Thea echoed hollowly.

So many things had been revealed in the past few minutes. Her own part in the dropping of her mother’s case against Fergus, for one.

That Fergus and her mother had never been intimate, for another.

Thea would be lying if she didn’t admit, to herself at least, that the thought of her mother and Fergus having sex had bothered her.

Learning that they hadn't, felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her chest.

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Having Linus tell her that Martin was her stalker had delivered that physical blow.

“I’m afraid so.” Linus Wynter was the one to answer her. “He arrived back in the UK today, again by train, an hour after you did. He then went to his apartment to drop off his bag before driving to your home. When you didn’t answer his knock on your door, your neighbor came out and told him you were still away on holiday. He returned to his car and went online looking for where Fergus lives when he’s in London. The electoral register is public record,” he defended when Fergus glowered at him.

“So he knows where I am now?” Thea asked softly. She felt slightly sick at the thought.

Linus nodded. “He also searched for why there’s police tape around the side of your apartment building and again across the road. Then he drove here and began to loiter outside the building. Security didn’t like him being there, so one of them approached him and asked him his reason for being here. The guy muttered some excuse about being lost before skuttling away like the cowardly rabbit that he is. He can’t be anything else when he’s been terrorizing and then hit a woman. For the past few minutes, Hayes has been sitting in the coffee shop just down the street, watched by two men from Wynter Security.”

“Not anymore,” Nikolai Volkov put in harshly. “Once I learned of that situation, I made a call and instructed some of my own men to pick Hayes up and take him to one of our safe houses for questioning.”

Linus nodded. “Security tried to call you earlier, but you weren’t picking up,” he told

his brother.

Fergus scowled. “I was busy.”

Linus’s mouth quirked. “Not going to ask doing what,” he taunted.

Thea was still in shock at learning that it was Martin, of all people, who had been—still was—stalking her.

Who had also followed her to Paris and knocked her unconscious in her hotel room.

But she still didn’t understand why he had.

“I want to see him,” she stated flatly.

Fergus turned to look at her. “See who— No!” he snapped when her meaning became clear to him.

“Yes. I want to know why he did those things.” Thea turned to Nikolai Volkov. “Can I do that?” She had no idea where or what a safe house was, but Nikolai’s expression told her it wasn’t a safe place for Martin.

Not that he deserved one if he really was responsible for stalking and then attacking her.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

“You can,” Nikolai answered her. “But I do not recommend doing so.”

“Why not?” Thea demanded.

“Because this man’s behavior brought fear into your life.” He shrugged broad shoulders. “A fear I believe it unnecessary for you to feel again because of him, however briefly.”

He was right, of course. In fact, Thea had a feeling that Nikolai Volkov was very rarely wrong.

She turned to look at Fergus. “How did you know to ask Linus to look into Martin specifically as possibly being my stalker?”

“The pillow.”

She frowned her confusion. “What?”

“The pillow,” he repeated. “You said it was the only thing that had been stolen when someone broke into your apartment. Which meant whoever took it had to know what that pillow meant to you. That led me to believe the thief had to be a close friend or an ex-lover. You had already told me you found it easier to have acquaintances rather than close friends, as a result of your connection to the Yegorovs. Martin Hayes became the most obvious candidate as your stalker.”

It made sense when Fergus explained it in those terms. The pillow was very special to her, and whoever had taken it had to have known that. She had just never thought of Martin behaving in this underhanded and violent way.

Fergus looked far from happy at his own explanation.

“Martin wasn’t my lover,” Thea told him. “We dated for a while but never really clicked in that way.” She shot Fergus a rueful glance. “Remember, I told you he said my arse was too scrawny?”

“Unappreciative fucker,” Fergus muttered.

“He saidwhat?” Nikolai Volkov prompted incredulously.

“Guy must need glasses!” Linus scoffed.

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“Never mind.” Thea waved a dismissive hand when she saw how Fergus’s expression had darkened at the reaction of the other two men.

Her only intention had been to tease Fergus out of his annoyance, not involve the other two men in what was really a private conversation.

“Fergus, you’re missing the point,” she complained when he continued to glare at his brother and Nikolai for daring to comment on the subject of the bottom he coveted.

“Which is?”

“Martin was never my lover.”

It took a second or two, but then the scowl disappeared from Fergus’s brow and his shoulders relaxed. “Right. Good. Okay.” He nodded his satisfaction with that answer before turning to glare at Linus and Nikolai. “But I advise the two of you to stop looking at my woman’s backside!” He winced when Thea drew in a sharp breath. “I apologize for sounding like a Neanderthal, but that’s what you are to me now.”

“I still don’t understand, why would Martin do those things?” Thea quickly asked before either Linus or Nikolai could say something else to ignite Fergus’s temper. Something they were doing deliberately, Thea believed, from the wide grins she could see on their faces.

“I believe that is one of the questions you wish to ask him yourself,” Nikolai drawled before taking another sip of his coffee.

“I... Will your men...torture him to get those answers if I don’t talk to him?” It seemed a distinct possibility, considering she was living in a parallel universe where a high-ranking member of the Russian bratva was calmly sitting a few feet away, drinking the coffee she had just made.

Blond brows rose over Nikolai’s pale gray eyes. “I believe you have watched too many gangster movies, Miss Morgan.”

She glared. “That didn’t answer my question.”

“No, it did not.” He placed his empty coffee mug carefully down on the breakfast bar before those wolf’s eyes focused directly on her.

“Well?” she prompted again.

He shrugged. “If he does not give the answers you seek, then my men will use whatever methods they deem necessary to extract truthful information from the man who has been stalking you. The same man who also broke into your hotel suite in Paris and physically attacked you,” Nikolai reminded grimly.

Thea could hear the challenge in Nikolai’s voice, and while she didn’t approve of violence, she also couldn’t protest the way Nikolai protected the people he cared about. Apparently, because of her connection to Fergus, she was now included in that number.

She also couldn’t fault his logic. Martin had attacked her. Admittedly, she had only been knocked out for a few minutes, and the cut at the side of her head hadn’t needed stitches. But, as Martin had just left her lying unconscious on the floor, there was no way he could have known how serious that blow to the head was going to be.

Fergus was the one who had found her, protected her, and Nikolai wanted to do the

same. Even if his methods were more...violent than Fergus's.

Which meant she wasn't about to challenge Nikolai on his methods of interrogation, or the retribution that followed.

"Although I believe I can already give you the answers you require and save you the trouble of ever seeing him again," Nikolai continued evenly. "In my experience, a cowardly man like Martin Hayes would believe that scaring you before offering his shoulder to cry on was the surest and easiest way to persuade you to resume your relationship. No doubt with the intention of the two of you getting married, giving him full access to your finances as your husband."

"Over my dead body!" Fergus growled.

Nikolai sent him an appreciative glance. "A commendable assertion, but I do not think that will be necessary." He looked at Thea again. "You recently inherited fifty million pounds."

It wasn't a question but a statement, and Thea saw no reason to question how Nikolai knew that. Better to just accept that he did.

She nodded. "Martin only wanted to resume our relationship because he wanted access to the money my mother left me. So, you're saying that when I refused, he started to stalk me because he thought I would turn to him for protection and he could achieve his end game that way?"

The Russian nodded. "A couple of hours with my men would confirm that explanation, but I believe so, yes."

"What will happen if he admits to that being the case?"

“He will be issued a severe warning never to go near you again if, or when, he is released,” Nikolai corrected smoothly. “Hopefully, that will be a sufficient deterrent for him not to come anywhere near you ever again.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“Then he will suffer an even worse beating, followed by another, until the point has been driven home to him that he is not to be anywhere within your vicinity.”

Thea thought over what Nikolai had just said and knew, without talking to Martin, that this was exactly how events had unfolded.

“I don’t need to speak to him after all,” she told Nikolai.

“You don’t?” Fergus looked surprised.

Thea thought she also saw relief in his eyes. “No. I’ve decided I don’t need to waste any more of my time on him than I already have.” After all, the evidence of Martin having followed her to Paris, where he had then attacked her, no doubt because by that time, he had realized she was there to ask Fergus for the help he wanted to offer her, was pretty overwhelming. Which meant he didn’t deserve either her concern or consideration.

“You really can ensure he won’t ever come near me again?” Thea was willing to ignore her aversion to violence if Nikolai could guarantee that was the case.

“I can,” Nikolai confirmed before checking the message that had just been delivered to his cell phone. “You should also know the man who shot Mr. Quinn this morning is now dead, after he resisted when my men tried to capture him. Lev Yegorov is now in the custody of more of my men and on his way to the same safe house as Hayes. I intend to question him myself. Perhaps being a witness to my questioning Yegorov will be enough of a deterrent to Hayes to stop him from bothering you again,” he added with satisfaction.

Thea swallowed, already shaken from the casual way in which Nikolai had said the man who shot Declan was now dead. “Question him...?”

“Yes.” Nikolai’s eyes narrowed. “I despise the greedy pigs who stole money from the ordinary people of Russia so that they could live in luxury in the West. And no, I am not one of them,” he assured. “I left Russia for England when I was sixteen, a penniless orphan who had lived and starved on the streets for all the years before

that.”

Thea remembered Fergus had implied Nikolai’s background wasn’t one of wealth. “I’m sorry.”

Nikolai nodded. “I am wealthy now, and in a position of power. But I ensure that fifty percent of my wealth and my power is used for the good of the ordinary Russian people. Yegorov senior stole from them before escaping Russia with his son and his ill-gotten millions.”

There was no mistaking the vehemence in Nikolai’s voice or the cold glitter of intent in his eyes.

She nodded. “I would like you to take the fifty million pounds left to my mother and return that to the Russian people in whatever way you see fit.”

His eyes widened. “That money was left to you.”

She frowned. “It’s dirty money. Stolen from the people who need it. I don’t want it. I never did.”

Nikolai inclined his head. “Then I will gladly return it to my people. Thank you.”

“I still don’t understand why Lev changed his mind so drastically from wanting to marry me.” Thea quickly reached out to give Fergus’s arm a reassuring squeeze when he gave a low growl. “To him wanting to kill me,” she finished.

“Lev Yegorov no longer possesses the extensive wealth his father left him three years ago,” Nikolai told her. “He either gambled or snorted most of it away before leaving the US. In fact, debt was one of the reasons he left that country. He has gambled, snorted, or injected what was left of that money since moving to London.”

“He’s a drug addict?”

“Very much so.”

Thea’s eyes widened. “And he’s spent all those millions his father left him on drugs and gambling?” Unbelievable as that sounded, it would certainly explain why Lev was now so determined to marry her.

“I am afraid that Yegorov now has a serious addiction to heroin as well as to gambling.” Nikolai nodded. “He is also a terrible businessman, with one failed venture after another. An alliance between the two of you would have ensured he had access to the fifty million pounds your mother left you. No doubt so that he could gamble and shoot up and make bad business decisions with that too,” he added with distaste.

“But I offered to give the money to him after my mother died,” Thea protested. “Several times.”

Nikolai’s chiseled lips quirked into a smile. “I did not say that was his only reason for wanting to marry you.”

“I don’t understand...”

“You are a beautiful woman, Thea.” Nikolai waved a dismissive hand in Fergus’s direction as he uttered another possessive growl. “You have met my Daisy and know that I love her and our children with my whole heart,” the Russian snapped. “I am merely making an obvious observation. I believe, because of his insistence that you marry him, that Yegorov junior must want you for himself. That he was even willing to wait to take possession of that fifty million pounds if you also became his once you were married.”

Thea shook her head. “I would never have married him.”

“Not willingly, perhaps, but I have a feeling Lev’s patience would have soon come to an end if Fergus was not now obviously standing between the two of you as your protector.”

“But how... Are you saying that Lev had someone following me in Paris too?”

“I can answer that,” Linus cut in lightly. “Yes, he did. Those men arrived back in England on the same train as Martin Hayes.”

Thea swallowed down the nausea that had risen at the back of her throat. “I had men employed by a Russian oligarch following me around Paris, as well as a machinating ex-boyfriend, and I had absolutely no idea!”

Nikolai gave a humorless smile. “Do not be too hard on yourself. I am sure, once you had seen Fergus for the first time, you had eyes for no one else,” he taunted the other man.

“Bastard,” Fergus muttered.

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Nikolai openly grinned at him before sobering. “Now that I have also chosen to intercede, you may be assured, Thea, that you will not see Lev Yegorov again.”

One look into those icy-gray eyes and Thea knew Nikolai’s anger toward the other man wasn’t all about her. That Nikolai Volkov’s own reasons for wishing Lev to disappear were just as valid. Whether that was by returning Lev to Russia to face the wrath of the Russian people, or by ensuring that Lev “disappeared” by Nikolai’s own hand would be his decision.

It was a totally different world from the one in which Thea had been living for the past twenty-four years. But she couldn’t say she wouldn’t be relieved to have both Lev and Martin out of her life. Even if it was by, as Nikolai claimed, whatever method he deemed necessary.

She knew she should feel bad that she felt that way, but those two men had made her life unbearable since her mother died.

“Can I just add something here?” Linus cut in. “I didn’t only check on Martin Hayes earlier, I also looked into Lev Yegorov after Fergus told me he was trying to force you into marrying him. Amongst all the same distasteful things Nikolai learned about the man”—his mouth twisted with disgust—“I also discovered that several days ago, he had his lawyer draw up, and falsify the signature, on the Last Will and Testament of one Thea Jane Morgan, in which he was made the sole beneficiary. Like Nikolai, I believe he changed his plans after discovering, as Hayes had, that Thea had gone to Fergus to ask for his assistance.”

Thea could barely breathe, her chest tight as she tried to draw in more air.

If she hadn't gone to Fergus and asked for his help, she had no doubt she would now be either dead or married to a man she despised.

* * *

"It's okay." Fergus quickly stepped forward to wrap his arms about Thea and cradle her gently against him. "Neither of them will ever hurt you again." He gave Nikolai a look he hoped conveyed to the other man how much he wanted that to be true. Fergus didn't want either of those two bastards coming anywhere near Thea ever again.

The only reason he wasn't personally ensuring that happened was because he believed Thea needed his presence here with her more than Fergus needed to settle scores he knew Nikolai would deal with far more efficiently than he could.

The bastard.

"I believe it is now time for the two of us to leave," Nikolai prompted Linus as he rose gracefully to his feet before refastening the button on his perfectly tailored jacket. "It has been a pleasure meeting you, Thea." He took hold of her hand and lightly kissed the back of it when she turned to look at him, eliciting another disapproving snort from Fergus. Which the Russian again completely ignored. "I look forward to seeing you again soon," the other man added, completely unperturbed by Fergus's caveman attitude.

"Thank you for your assistance today," she acknowledged huskily.

"Anytime." He nodded before turning that sharp silver gaze on Fergus. "I will look forward to receiving yet another Wynter family wedding invitation soon."

Fergus decided, then and there, that no matter what, Nikolai was not going to be the godfather to any of his and Thea's children.

But first, he'd need to ask, possibly persuade, Thea into wanting to marry him.

Because he knew, without a single doubt, in the same way that his brother and cousin had known the moment they met their future wives, that Thea was the woman he loved and wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fergus's apartment felt strangely empty and silent once Nikolai and Linus left.

Not that Thea had been able to hear any of the sounds of the city this high up, anyway, but it now seemed especially quiet. A world totally separate from the hustle and bustle that was London.

Thea had no doubt that was partly because Nikolai was such an overwhelming presence. Linus, at over six feet tall and broadly muscled, was no slouch either when it came to making an impact on his surroundings.

There was also this...frisson of silence between herself and Fergus that she thought they had dealt with before the other two men arrived. One that a scowling Fergus didn't seem inclined to fill as he instead seemed lost in thought.

Thea finally couldn't stand the silence another moment longer. "Well, that was...enlightening."

Fergus focused his attention back on her. "I still can't believe... It was very brave of you to stand up to your mother all those years ago."

Thea gave a shrug, as if it was unimportant. When, in fact, her mother had barely spoken to her for the next six months, and even after that, it had only been when it was absolutely necessary. In some ways, it had been a relief when Jessica married

Andrei and mother and daughter had barely interacted at all.

“You didn’t deserve her brand of crazy,” she dismissed. “No one did.”

* * *

And yet Fergus knew Thea had suffered through that craziness for almost all of her twenty-four years.

It was still a wonder to him, a miracle, how she had turned out to be so loving and levelheaded.

“You didn’t need to bear the brunt of her anger either by defending me—” Fergus stopped speaking when Thea placed her fingertips against his lips.

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“It’s in the past,” she assured him, her hand dropping back to her side. “All of it is in the past. My mother. Andrei. Lev. Martin.” She shuddered. “I don’t want to think or talk about any of it or them anymore.”

Fergus knew that was probably because it hurt too much to do so.

He also had no doubt that these events, past and present, would intrude into her thoughts from time to time in the future. Fergus intended to be right by her side when they did.

“How are you so damned strong?” he murmured with admiration. “Most people would have collapsed under the emotional baggage of having a woman like Jessica as their mother, and now having these two other motherfu—bastards,” he supplemented, his jaw clenching, “trying to manipulate or kill you in order to get their hands on what was left of Andrei Yegorov’s filthy money.”

Thea chuckled. “Maybe I am collapsing, and I just don’t realize it yet!”

“No,” Fergus stated. “You’re far too strong for that. I...I’ve never met anyone I admire and like as much as I do you, Thea.”

* * *

Fergus admired and liked her?

Oh.

“No, no, no,” he hastened to assure when he obviously saw the confusion in her expression. “I’ve only known the grown-up you for less than forty-eight hours, and I know without a doubt that isn’t all I feel for you.”

“Without a doubt, hmm?” Thea was afraid to hope, to dream, of what might or could be.

His mouth quirked with humor, his gaze warm. “Are you teasing me?”

“I do that sometimes when I’m nervous or uncertain about something.”

He nodded. “Never having done this before, I’m a little nervous myself right now.”

Thea’s heart felt as if it had jolted against the confines of her rib cage, her mouth suddenly dry. “Done what before?”

Fergus straightened, his eyes staring straight into hers. “Told a woman I love her.”

It felt as if Thea’s heart had actually jumped out of her chest this time. “I... You?—”

“I love you,” Fergus repeated steadily. “I love everything about you. Your loyalty. Your honesty. Your moral code. Your beauty?—”

“But especially my bottom?” she teased, really not sure she was hearing those other words correctly.

Fergus loved her?

No one had loved her since her father died. Not her mother. Not Martin. And certainly not Lev.

“Including your bottom,” Fergus corrected dryly. “But it’s your heart that I love the most. It’s beautiful. Warm and caring toward other people.”

She winced. “I don’t feel that way toward Lev and Martin right now.”

“We all have a choice, Thea. You gave them every opportunity to do the right thing and walk away from you. It’s on them that they chose not to.” He placed his hand beneath her chin and lifted her face until her gaze met his once again. “You are warm and beautiful, and I love you. Deeply.” He winced. “I know it’s only been a couple of days since we met again, but?—”

“I love you too,” she cut in breathlessly. “This might seem weird, but I think I’ve been in love with you for the past ten years without realizing it.”

“I can’t claim that—and it’s probably as well that I can’t, considering you were only fourteen at the time! But I’ve never forgotten the amazing color of your eyes,” he revealed huskily. “It’s how I recognized you so easily in Paris once you were close enough for me to see them properly.”

Thea moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “So we really are dating?”

“No.”

She blinked. “But... What are you doing?” She gasped as Fergus went down on one knee in front of her. “Fergus...?”

He took one of her hands in his. “I’ll give you all the time you need, live anywhere and do anything you want, but I need to know that at the end of that time, you’re going to marry me.”

“And...?” she prompted expectantly.

“Oh. Yes. Thea Jane Morgan, will you do me the greatest honor I could ever imagine and become my wife? Please.”

It was that uncertain please at the end of the request that caused a sob to catch in Thea’s throat.

There was also something so very...humbling about having a man like Fergus go down on one knee before proposing.

She didn’t hesitate to answer him. “Yes!” She used their joined hands to pull him back up onto his feet. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He smiled. “That’s a yes, then.”

Thea grinned. “Very much so. And you don’t need to wait or live anywhere other than where you already do.”

His eyes widened. “You’ll live in Paris with me?”

Her smile widened. “I’m sure I can get a teaching job there. Besides, it will be an adventure.”

“The biggest and best adventure of our lives,” Fergus promised before lowering his head so that his lips could claim hers.

* * *

“I have one more request,” Fergus murmured a long time later when the two of them were entwined naked together in what was now their bed. “However many children we decide to have, Nikolai-fucking-Volkov will not be godfather to any of them.”

Thea chuckled, already knowing that was exactly what was going to happen.

She was right. Nikolai and Daisy Volkov became the loving and attentive godparents to all three of Thea and Fergus’s children.