



Final Cost

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Tamsyn is my life. But my tortured past threatens our future...

I own a vast fortune. Yet my life felt worthless until my chance meeting with Tamsyn Scott. She awakened something irresistible inside me that had lain dormant for far too long. So I followed her to Europe, where we indulged in scorching hot pleasure. Then I brought her home to my family estate, Ackerley, because she's mine and I can't bear to let her go. Everything seemed perfect. Until my nightmare past reared its ugly head and ruined it all. So I pushed Tamsyn away. To keep her safe. Even though it killed me.

Now I'm suspected of a heinous crime. The walls are closing in. My options are limited. But I'm determined to get myself out of this mess, seek redemption and beg her for a second chance. Will it be easy? No. But here's the thing: she loves me more than she hates me and she's still mine. We both know nothing will ever change that...

FINAL COST is a billionaire, age-gap romance with a possessive hero and a strong young heroine. It's the epic conclusion in the brand-new Winter Trilogy. For fans of REBECCA.

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Lucien

“Your wife is dead. Ravenna is dead. And the circumstances are...unusual,” Detective Smith tells me as I stand there by my pool, dripping wet and out of breath from my early morning swim. She’s got a tinge of concern in her voice now, as though she’s seen the sudden eruption of goosebumps over my body and knows I’m chilled to the bone. Although whether that’s from her news or the cold water is anyone’s guess. “Are you with me, Mr. Winter? Did you hear what I said?”

Oh, I heard her all right. The soaring sense of freedom — of triumph— inside my chest proves it. But now is not the moment to let out a whoop and pump my fist in the air. Detective Smith is watching me closely. Worse, she’s smart. The kind of smart I don’t want breathing down my neck and eyeing me with suspicion. Which means I should say...something. Something appropriately shocked and upset. But it takes me another beat or two to tear my attention away from the picture of Ravenna’s dead face on Detective Smith’s phone.

The bitch is dead. Really dead this time.

I find myself oddly riveted by the dull skin that’s completely devoid of Ravenna’s usual radiant vitality. Those green eyes of hers are flat now. Empty. I never thought I’d live to see them without a spark of malice in them. But she’s still secretive, even in death. She took her inscrutable half smile with her into the afterlife. Probably because she died knowing that she could still stick it to me. Even now. Especially now. I should have known. Actually, I did know, didn’t I? I’ve had a dress rehearsal

for Ravenna's death once before. Two years ago, when she faked her death in a boating accident out in the bay right there behind my house.

Ravenna always has a trick. Another trick. A worse trick.

"I heard you," I finally say, tearing my gaze away from her phone with great difficulty and clearing my gravelly voice.

"Let's sit," she says, gesturing me toward one of the wrought iron tables framing the pool. "It'll be easier to talk that way."

I pull out a chair, the scrape of metal against concrete hitting my jangled nerves like a good scrubbing with sandpaper hits a road rash. Then I sit. Not because I need to sit, but I appreciate her solicitousness. And not because I'm overcome with grief or shock — trust me, I'm not — but because I welcome the tiny intermission.

It gives me a second to remember my avid audience.

In addition to Detective Smith, two uniformed officers, their hats tucked under their arms out of respect for my sudden loss, watch me. So do my housekeeper, Maddie, and Daniel, my estate manager and lifelong friend. They all knew Ravenna and I were estranged, but I'm betting their tolerance for my mixed emotions only stretches so far. That being the case, I'd better start approximating a man who is upset by the unexpected loss of a young life rather than a man who doesn't believe in heaven or hell but is willing to make an exception long enough to imagine Ravenna roasting in a particularly hot ring of fire.

That's the fate a person like Ravenna deserves. And, lest we forget, that's the fate she wanted for Tamsyn Scott, the love of my life, isn't it? Ravenna set fire to the guest cottage the other night with every intention of killing Tamsyn, who was asleep inside it at the time. I was able to save Tamsyn by some miracle, but I knew that Tamsyn

would never be safe as long as Ravenna was alive. She'd always be the target of Ravenna's spite. That's the kind of thing a sweet young woman with her entire life ahead of her didn't deserve. The kind of thing I swore to protect Tamsyn from—the twisted ugliness of my life with a psychopathic wife. So I dumped Tamsyn. As callously and coldly as I could. Why? Because I knew that was the only way to drive her away and out of Ravenna's line of fire for good. After all, Ravenna never really wanted Tamsyn. She wanted me. That was my plan, and it worked. Even though every harsh word I spoke to Tamsyn felt like an ice pick slicing through my own heart. Not that I feel sorry for myself. My own misery has been a small price to pay for Tamsyn's life. I'd do it again if I had to.

Now Ravenna is dead.

But this nightmare isn't over yet. Not by a long shot. A dead Ravenna is every bit as dangerous to me as a living one. Not in terms of Tamsyn's welfare — she's safely ensconced in her former employer's brownstone back in the Upper East Side in Manhattan now, thank God. But all of us gathered here today around this pool know one very important fact: that the number one suspect in a wife's unusual death is always the husband. So I need to put Tamsyn out of my mind and worry about keeping my ass out of jail. Pronto.

“What happened to Ravenna?” I ask Detective Smith, my voice still gruff. “You said the circumstances were unusual? Does that mean suspicious?”

“We'll get to that in a minute,” she says, tucking her phone into her back pocket. “If you're feeling better now, we'd like to take you down to the station for a formal talk.”

“I'm sure you would,” I say, in no mood for any cat and mouse games with the good detective here. She's been giving me beady looks ever since Ravenna returned from the dead a few days ago. As if I had anything to do with either her dis- or re-appearance. “Down at the station, you and your partner will be able to question me on

camera. I'm guessing one of you will be the good cop and one of you will be the bad cop. You'll keep me there and badger me until I forget which side is up and say something incriminating. I know how this movie ends."

There's a pause. Her poker face never wavers. "Mr. Winter?"

"I pay my lawyers good money to keep me out of jail," I continue. "I wouldn't want them to miss the action down at the police station. So I'd like them with me. Matter of fact, strike that. They'd tell me not to speak with you at all."

A flicker of silent dismay from the good detective.

"So if you want to speak with me, now is going to be your one and only chance," I conclude.

My arrogant little speech isn't doing me any favors with the cops. I know that. But a man with my wealth and position enjoys a few privileges, which includes not being hauled down to the station for questioning. Not unless I'm under arrest, that is. An eventuality that I fervently pray never happens. On the other hand, there's a new gleam of respect in Detective Smith's eyes. So maybe we understand each other a bit better.

"Whichever you prefer," she says easily. "We'll start with the basics. Where were you last night, Mr. Winter? Your housekeeper indicated that the staff hadn't seen you since early last night. She wasn't sure you were down here by the pool just now, but she brought me down here on a hunch."

Maddie shoots me a distraught I'm sorry look over Detective Smith's shoulder, but I give her a tiny head shake to let her know it's all right. I don't blame her for anything. She had no way of knowing what was going on.

“I went for a drive,” I say.

“A drive?” Detective Smith doesn’t bother hiding her disbelief. I’m sure she’s disappointed. She probably expected a wealthy guy like me to have a better alibi.”

“A drive.” I say.

“Where to?”

“I don’t know. Around Great Neck.”

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“You drove around,” Detective Smith says, enunciating each word with perfect clarity. “That’s what you want me to believe?”

I shrug. “Why not? It’s the truth. What happened to my wife?”

The two of us regard each other in a rigid silence. Her gaze flickers to the two uniforms, who have drifted over to stand behind me. Maybe they think I’ll run. Maybe they plan to cuff me. But I doubt they have anything on me other than the standard spousal suspicion. Meanwhile, Maddie and Daniel are still standing outside of Detective Smith’s line of sight, their heads together in worried murmurs.

“We’ve had an APB out on your wife since the fire the other night,” Detective Smith finally says.

“Yes, and...?” I say.

“And, one of our patrol cars saw her Jaguar parked near the beach a little while ago. He headed down there to check things out. Found her lying face up at water’s edge. My team is processing the scene right now.”

“That’s how she got found. What killed her?”

She studies me long and hard. “Someone crushed the back of her skull with something big and heavy?—”

“Christ,” mutters Daniel, and there’s a choked cry from Maddie.

“— Possibly one of the rocks in the area,” Detective Smith concludes.

It’s all too easy to imagine someone enraged enough at Ravenna to do just that. “I see.”

There’s a pause.

“You see how this looks, Mr. Winter?” Detective Smith leans her elbows on the table and hunkers in, her penetrating gaze zeroed all the way in on me. “You and Ravenna were estranged. You told me so yourself. The other day, she tried to kill your new girlfriend, Tamsyn. And now Ravenna turns up dead. Now it’s a straight line from A to B that you found her and killed her in a fit of rage. Or hired someone to find her and kill her. God knows you have the resources.”

“I didn’t kill her. And if I did, I’d like to think I’m smart enough to have a better alibi.”

“Good point,” says Detective Smith, nodding thoughtfully. “You know who else had a motive to kill Ravenna? Your new girlfriend, Tamsyn. Wonder whatheralibi is for last night.”

The words hang in the air like an anvil midway to dropping on my head.

Crushing. Horrific.

The healthy fear I feel about keeping myself out of jail is nothing compared to the icy terror that instantly encases my heart at the thought of Tamsyn in any sort of peril. Physical, legal, financial, emotional. Doesn’t matter. If there’s one thing about me—one thing I willalwaysdo—it’s protect Tamsyn from any sort of danger. If there’s one thing I willnevertolerate, it’s someone threatening her.

I don't give a fuck how many badges the someone is wearing.

I rest my elbows on the table, leaning in and mirroring Detective Smith's posture. "Tamsyn Scott had nothing to do with this," I say, and the vibrating fervency in my voice sounds like a rattlesnake to my own ears. I can only imagine how it sounds to Detective Smith. "Leave her out of it." I stand. "If there's nothing else...? I need to call my lawyer."

She also stands, her pleasant professionalism still perfectly in place. But she's got a hawk's keen eyes, and I'd be a fool to underestimate her for one second. "Thanks for your time. We'll stay in touch." A delicate pause. "We'll also need to see your security tapes from last night."

I figured she would, but she doesn't say it in awe'll clear your name and find the real culprit ASAP kind of way. It's a lot more, I'm going to nail your ass to the wall the first chance I get, you arrogant fuck, and that's what worries me.

"You have a warrant?" I say, matching her tone.

Her narrowed eyes tell me she doesn't appreciate the paperwork, but she recovers quickly. "I'm happy to observe the legalities, Mr. Winter. Oh, and now wouldn't be the time for you to hop on your private jet and fly off somewhere without checking in with me first." With that, she raps her knuckles on the table and walks off, her uniforms trailing behind her.

I exchange swift glances with Maddie and Daniel as she goes. They seem shell shocked. Uncertain. Whether it's because of concern or suspicion toward me, I don't know and don't give a fuck right now.

My mind is too full of all things Tamsyn and how much I miss her. How wrecked I've been without her. I'm wondering how best to keep her close while I work my

way through this ordeal. I'm thanking God I had the foresight the other day to put a team in place to protect her.

Most importantly, I'm wondering how I'm going to get her back now that Ravenna is dead.

2

Tamsyn

"There you are, Mary Poppins," Mrs. Hooper says in her booming Texas twang the second I leave my bedroom in her Upper East Side townhouse and join her in the marble extravaganza of the airy kitchen, where she's got a spread of bagels, cream cheeses and enough toppings to fuel every local brunch for the next week or so. She uses her remote to mute the TV on her morning news show and hits me with all her good morning, Sunshine energy. "Did you sleep well? I was about to come upstairs and give you the mirror test to make sure you were still alive."

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I discreetly check the clock on the range. It's seven thirty-two. Exactly two minutes later than I normally appear in the mornings. I exchange a weary it's too early for this glance with her cute but satanic Yorkie, Juniper, in her little four poster dog bed on the floor under the table. Juniper pauses gnawing her latest stuffed animal into extinction long enough to bare her teeth and growl at me.

"I slept great," I tell Mrs. Hooper, my bright smile firmly in place once I shoot a veiled glare at Juniper. It's a total lie. I didn't sleep. At all. But since I'm firmly in my fake it till I make it phase, I'm determined to lie my ass off. Whatever it takes to power through this heartbroken season of my life. And it is just a season. I have complete confidence that if I repeat this mantra, it will become true.

Besides, Mrs. Hooper is nosy enough already. I don't plan to add more leafy branches to her ladies who lunch grapevine by admitting that I had another bad night and that it took me longer than usual to hoist my I'm okay, nothing to see here facade into place this morning. If nothing else, my pride won't allow it.

"I see." She's cheery as usual today, her pink and green Lilly Pulitzer summer florals firmly in place and her short silver fox hair coiffed to perfection. But she eyes me with dubious concern, her expression sharper than usual. Difficult to believe she took a hard fall several short days ago and had me and her niece Penny concerned about possible dementia. She's good as new now, thank God. Following a thorough workup and a simple tweak of her medications, she's now got the brain of young Nancy Drew and is determined to ferret out every personal detail she can about my failed relationship with Lucien Winter.

I'm just as determined to keep the details to myself.

“If you say so,” she adds, absently tearing off a piece of smoked salmon and slipping it under the counter to Juniper, who snaps it up with gusto. “Those bags under your eyes aren’t getting any lighter though, honey. Let me know if you want me to put you in touch with my plastic surgeon.”

Right. Because I, as a newly graduated RN in her early twenties and whose full-time job as an oncology nurse at one of the local cancer centers doesn’t start until the fall, have an unlimited budget for cosmetic procedures.

“Will do,” I say, my pleasant smile already feeling signs of strain. I grab a plate and load it up with breakfast as though I plan to eat it. Everything tastes like moldy sawdust to me, these days, but I’ve discovered that it’s easier to pretend to eat rather than give her something else to comment on. “Where’s Penny?”

“Oh, she’s already off to Trader Joe’s or Whole Foods. One of the fancy markets. She said something about having a taste for pomegranates.”

“Pomegranates are important,” I murmur, keeping a close eye on Juniper as he comes over to give me an experimental sniff. As a long-time enemy of mine from when I was Mrs. Hooper’s personal nurse, I never know when he might decide to nip one of my unsuspecting ankles for kicks.

“Going for another jog in the park, are you?” She says, her swift gaze encompassing my baseball cap, ponytail, tank top and runner’s shorts. “You’ll be ready for the Olympics with all this training. You won’t catch me running in this heat.”

“It’s not that bad,” I say, sliding onto one of the stools and helping myself to some coffee. “It’s good for me.”

This is another lie. I hate jogging with the white-hot passion of a thousand suns. But you know what I hate worse than jogging? Being so hyped up on adrenaline that all I

see is the cruel set of Lucien's mouth when he ripped out my foolish little heart by telling me — what was it? — that he's already bored with me and doesn't love me despite previously claiming that he did. So if enduring forty-five minutes or so of burning thighs and blinding sweat dripping in my eyes gives me a little bit of a respite from hearing the harshness of his voice the last time we were together, I'll take it.

"Oh, and Cynthia Johnson called a little while ago." Mrs. Johnson is one of Mrs. Hooper's friends who joined us on the cruise. "She asked about you, of course."

"Did she?" I say, now slathering cream cheese on my unwanted bagel with relentless focus. I know it's coming. This is one of Mrs. Hooper's periodic attempts to gather information from me. You really gotta hand it to her. She's like one of the velociraptors systematically testing the electronic fence for weakness in Jurassic Park. She's got endless focus and endless angles for trying to break through my resistance. My only job is to see the attempts coming and continue deflecting. "And how is she doing? Is she still talking about you ladies going to Atlantic City for a girl's night out soon?"

"We're just all so worried about you," she says as though I haven't spoken. "All this business about Lucien's wife coming back from the dead. I mean, the timing couldn't be worse, could it? Just as you went off to Ackerley to spend the rest of the summer with him. And now it's all ended in tears." A delicate pause. "As I thought it would with a young girl like you and an older and much more sophisticated man like that."

I continue slathering, deciding not to mention that I've never cried in front of her. It would be a waste of time and breath. There's no stopping her when she gets like this.

"Far be it for me to ever tell anyone I told you so. That's not me, honey. You know it's not."

I repress a snort with difficulty.

“But Ididdo my best to warn you that a man like Lucien Winter is not for you, Tam. Resurrected wife or not. As painful as this all seems right now, it’s for the best that he’s out of your life now. And I’m here. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need —”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hooper,” I say, grateful for her generosity. Even if it does seem to entitle her to a bird’s eye view of my dumpster fire of a personal life.

“— As long as it isn’t more than another week or so. You know the folks are coming to put some of my things in storage and stage the house so I can get it on the market. And we’ll need to fumigate just to make sure we don’t have any critter issues. That would be a nightmare.”

My heart sinks at this reminder. “Of course. I understand. My plan is to be gone before then,” I say, leaving off the part about not having any idea of where I plan to go or how I plan to pay for it. I just spent a large chunk of my savings on securing a new apartment for when I start working in the fall. But it’s not available for weeks yet. Plus, I don’t exactly have the funds for a nice temporary rental or hotel room in the meantime. But I’m smart. I’ll figure it out. That’s an issue for another day.

“Meanwhile, if you ever want to talk about, you know, what happened with Lucien at Ackerley, I’m here for you. It’s none of my business, of course, but I assume that he and Ravenna reconciled...?”

She waits and watches hopefully, but there’s no way I can respond to her, much less disabuse her of the notion that they reconciled. I just don’t have the energy for it. Plus, she’s right. It’s absolutely none of her business. Meanwhile, a new batch of roiling emotions crowds into my throat and smolders there at the mention of Lucien’s name.

Talk about it? And what would I say, exactly? That he swooped into my world like

the most beautiful summer dream imaginable, then left just as quickly with the force and brutality of an F5 tornado? Should I tell her that he took my sun with him and I now have no sun at all now—just this cratering black anger and bitterness?

And the funny thing is, I'm not angry at him. I'm angry at myself. Because I didn't listen to my gut when it came to him. I belong somewhere between Taylor Swift and Carrie Bradshaw as she beat Mr. Big about the head and shoulders with her wedding bouquet. Why? Because I knew both that Lucien Winter was trouble when he walked in and I knew he would do this to me before it was all over.

Oh, I enjoyed the adventure, sure. God knows I enjoyed the sex. I couldn't hand him my V-card fast enough, could I? My cheeks heat and my pussy throbs as I remember some of the things we did together and to each other. Delicious, illicit things. I let myself be swept away with the passion and the romance of it all. The laughter and the whispers and the tenderness. I allowed myself to pretend that an inexperienced twenty-something Brooklynite like me could catch the eye of a sophisticated, adventure-loving and easily bored billionaire like him. But it was all a girlish fantasy and part of me always knew it. A man like him isn't for me. He's got knowledge I'll never possess. He's full of secrets and lies. He's got an appetite for playing games with people's lives and the fortune to fund the games.

And I was the foolish and lovestruck idiot who allowed myself to think that I was getting to know him. That he was letting me in. Opening up and showing me his vulnerable side. My heart squeezes again, solidifying into a rock deep inside my chest. Like he said when he dumped me, I never knew him at all. I never had any idea what he was capable of. The manipulations.

Like what?

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He followed me to Europe. I never suspected a thing, as he well knew, and he couldn't wait to throw my naiveté in my face once he decided he'd had enough of me. And suddenly the whole improbable chain of events leading to our summer romance became painfully clear.

It went something like this:

He saw me at the airport. He wanted me. So he followed me to Europe. Stalked me, as a matter of fact. Because it was all a game for him. Instead of doing the normal, non-shady thing like asking me for a drink when we both got back to the city after our separate trips.

I was never a person with her own life and feelings as far as he was concerned. I was only a trinket he wanted to collect, the same as a blue Fabergé egg he might have bought at an auction and then sold at the next auction when he got tired of looking at it and decided he wanted a gold one instead.

Maybe I'm selling myself short. I was pretty enough to catch his attention, I suppose, and lucky enough to catch him on a day when he was bored enough to follow me. I guess he wanted to see how quickly he could seduce me. How tightly he could wrap me around his little finger. How deeply he could pull me into his twisted world. The thing that really sickens me is that I made it all so easy for him. I couldn't have made it easier. He twinkled his eyes at me and I was a goner. Now here I am, damaged. Hell, most days I feel ruined. But I still have my pride.

And Mrs. Hooper is still watching me.

“I’m fine. Really.” I hoist a smile back onto my lips. It takes a great deal of exhaustive effort. Then I catch myself reaching for the little necklace with the car pendant he gave me to remind me of my father, a car mechanic, remember I took it off and swore to myself I’d never wear it again, and drop my hand. “I know you’re right. I had a summer adventure, but it’s over now. And I’m getting ready for a new job, new apartment and making new friends. I’m excited about all that.”

“And dating new men, honey. Don’t forget about that.”

A new man. Right. I fight back a grimace. I want to jump back into the dating world the way a double amputee wants to take another stab at climbing that ladder with his running chainsaw. Still, I play along.

“Yep. You and your friends don’t have to worry about me,” I say. “I mean it. Lucien is out of my life. I’ll never see him again.”

She looks dubious. “You sure, honey?”

“I’m positive.”

This part is true. It came to me at zero dark thirty last night, after I’d run out of another batch of tears just before I fell asleep. The best thing I can do for myself is to keep busy. To focus on putting him out of my head. To pretend he’s dead to me. I’m tough. I can do it. I will not ask anyone about him or cyber-stalk him. I will stay in my own lane and focus on my own life. I will?—

My gaze suddenly and unwillingly snags on the TV over Mrs. Hooper’s shoulder. They’re showing an aerial view of an estate that looks —oh, my God— that looks like Ackerley.

Lucien’s estate.

“Hang on,” I say, getting up and lunging for the remote at the other end of the counter. And that’s when I see it: the breaking news banner crawling across the bottom of the screen.

Mystery deepens as Ravenna Winter found dead. Investigation ongoing.

Wait, what? Ravenna is dead?

“Oh, my God.” The information hits me hard, knocking out my breath and making my knees weak enough that I need to plant my palms on the counter for support to keep myself from dropping to the floor. “Oh, my God.”

“What’s this?” Mrs. Hooper cries, pressing her hand to her heart. “Oh, my God. That poor woman. She just came back from the dead, and now this? And poor Lucien, losing her again so soon after she came back to him. Life is so cruel, isn’t it, honey?”

I don’t bother trying to answer. My spinning thoughts refuse to settle on anything, much less a succinct explanation for everything that’s happened in the last few days. I didn’t tell Mrs. Hooper about Ravenna trying to kill me. Nor did the news ever hit the papers, other than a small online piece about how there’d been a fire at the guest cottage at Ackerley. I suppose that’s how rich people like Lucien do it. They hire PR teams and people to, I don’t know, bribe the cops and the press to keep nasty little things like their arsonist wives out of the news.

Even so, now is not the moment for me to tell Mrs. Hooper how ambivalent I feel about Ravenna’s death. Why? For one thing, part of me refuses to believe that Ravenna could ever really die. What’s that saying about Satan protecting his own? Surely all that spite and malice provides some sort of force field through which death can’t quite reach Ravenna. I can’t imagine her beauty and vitality being gone from this earth. It’s inconceivable. And now, for the first time, I truly understand how Lucien spent years refusing to believe that she was dead following her boating

accident. There's just no way an energy forcefield like that could ever be snuffed out.

On the other hand...the bitch is dead, they say?

Good.

That's the best news I've heard in a while. Not that I'm proud of myself for thinking it.

"Oh, my goodness," Mrs. Hooper says. "This is unbelievable. What is happening? How can this be? It just doesn't make any sense, does it?"

Her running commentary continues all through the field reporter's story, but I catch a few key phrases. Police statement... Continuing investigation... Cause of death undetermined thus far... Lucien Winter requests privacy at this difficult time.

"You know what this means, Tam," Mrs. Hooper says when the report ends, the familiar, scandalized glow of fresh gossip lighting up her face and energizing her voice. "This must've been a murder or suicide. We've both watched enough Law & Order to know that. And if it's not suicide, then —"

"Lucien's the main suspect," I supply dully, the room swooping in and out of focus.

That's when the dueling voices start up in my head.

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Voice One: He didn't do it, Tamsyn. You know he didn't do it. He's not a murderer. No matter how much he hated her and wanted to be rid of her.

Voice Two: Do I? I've seen him angry enough to kill her himself. Plus, he's got the resources to hire someone to do it for him if he didn't want to get his hands dirty.

I don't know which voice is the angel and which voice is the devil on my shoulder. I just know that both voices are equally loud. And that I cannot process this information under Mrs. Hooper's watchful gaze.

"I'm gonna go," I say, backing away from her and grabbing my keys from the basket on the counter as I go.

She looks startled. "Go? You haven't even eaten your breakfast, Tam."

"It's fine. I want to get out there before it gets too hot. I'll be right back."

"But —"

Too late. I make my escape by darting out the back door and down the steps before she can get anything else out. The air is dense and humid already, with no sign of a breeze, but it's fresh and desperately needed. So I greedily suck it in and try to get my spiraling thoughts under control.

Ravenna is dead. And Lucien —

I don't know what's at the end of that thought other than a brick wall. And it doesn't

matter anyway. None of the twisted drama coming from Ackerley has anything to do with me. I need to remember that.

Feeling better and more clearheaded, I head around the corner to the front of the brownstone?—

“There she is!” someone shouts, startling me.

I whip my head around looking for both the shouter and the she in question. Every now and then, I see a horde of paparazzi following some beleaguered celebrity. That’s not unusual here in Manhattan. The last time it happened, I caught a glimpse of Lady Gaga as she strode down the street.

But this time, the swarm of all male photographers congregating on the other side of the street with their long lenses swoop in and surround...me.

Wait, me?

“Tamsyn Scott? You’re Tamsyn Scott, aren’t you?” one of them calls.

“That’s her,” another one says. “I recognize her from her graduation photo online.”

“Oh, my God,” I say with rising panic, shrinking in on myself as they press closer and click away, right in my face. There’s nowhere to hide. Every time I try to turn away, another one jostles into position on the other side of me. They bump me. I stumble. They don’t seem to notice or care. The only thing keeping me from hitting the pavement is that I don’t have enough available space to face plant. There’s like five of them and one of me and I don’t know what the fuck is happening. I just know that I’m in trouble and the brownstone’s safety suddenly seems very far away. “What’s happening? What do you want?”

All their voices rise at the same time, a chorus of shouts.

“Any comment on Ravenna Winter’s sudden death?”

“How is your boyfriend Lucien handling this tragedy?”

“Any comment on the rumors of foul play? Is your boyfriend capable of something like that? Any theories?”

By now, I’m starting to get my wits about me. I’m also starting to get annoyed. How the hell do they even know I exist? “No comment,” I say, ducking my head and trying to shoulder my way through so I can continue toward Central Park. But there’s no opening and we’re all moving down the sidewalk together, one giant mass of arms, legs and cameras. I may need to sharpen my elbows and throw a few jabs and put a little more bass in my tone. “No comment, I said. Let me through.”

“All right, that’s enough,” comes a loud new voice rising above the fray. The next thing I know, a strong hand is clamped firmly around my upper arm and steering me toward the street. “She said no comment.”

Hang on. I know that voice. I know that tall frame and that uniform of white polo shirt and khaki pants. It’s one of Lucien’s security guys from Ackerley. Hank, isn’t it?

“Oh, thank God. Get me out of here, Hank,” I say, sagging against him with relief.

“You got it, Ms. Scott.”

Using his own body as a shield, he marches me over to a gleaming black Range Rover idling at the curb. The driver hops out — it’s another one of Lucien’s security guys, but I don’t know this one’s name — and opens the door for me. The next thing

I know, I'm safely ensconced in the backseat of this little cocoon of safety, zooming away from the paparazzi still shouting after us.

3

Tamsyn

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“This is crazy,” I say, my badly jangled nerves making my voice shaky as I buckle up and we pull away from the curb and merge with a steady flow of traffic. The heavy-duty SUV, complete with blackout windows and, knowing Lucien, bulletproof armor, feels like being safely ensconced in the tallest tower of the castle on the highest hill after that unexpected frenzy.

I’m grateful to be out of it. Really grateful.

“Are you okay, Ms. Scott?” Hank asks, now buckling his own seatbelt in the front passenger seat.

“I’m fine,” I say, and I mean it. “Call me, Tamsyn. I just don’t get why the press was even there. Why would they want to talk to me? I’m nobody.”

He twists at the waist and gives me an incredulous look over his shoulder. The question seems to amuse him. “You’re Lucien Winter’s girlfriend —”

“Not anymore,” I remind him.

“— And a man in his position is always going to attract enormous press attention. If your name gets tied to someone with that kind of fame and wealth?” He trails off, shrugging. “Your life is changed. You’d better start getting used to it.”

I don’t like the sound of that. At all. “Yeah, but how does the press even know anything about me?”

Another shrug. “Probably someone on the staff tipped them off for a few bucks. Most

of his employees have been with him and his family for decades and are very loyal. But his staff is so extensive you can't account for everyone all the time."

"Yeah, but he has them all sign NDA's, right?" I say, shocked to discover this kind of treachery.

"The lower ranking folks — the maids and gardeners and probably the kitchen and laundry staff — make a decent living, but they'll never get rich. They're happy to line their pockets if they think they can get away with it."

"I see," I say, my attention, snapping back to the real issue at hand. "It's really true then? Ravenna is dead?"

A grim nod. "Yes."

"What happened to her?"

He shrugs. "No one knows yet. The police are on it."

This confirmation sinks in with the weight of a couple of bull elephants resting across my shoulders. I hear him saying the words and it's not that I don't believe him. I just find it impossible to believe that Ravenna's malevolent presence has been erased from all our lives, just like that.

But she's not gone, of course. There's an investigation casting a shadow over Lucien and Ackerley now. I could almost laugh. It's so easy to imagine a ghostly Ravenna orchestrating all kinds of chaos from the other side of the veil. Hell, she's probably lingering around the halls of Ackerley right now, getting ready to rattle chains, smash lamps and knock over tables in the darkest part of the night.

How's Lucien?

The words are right there, sitting on the tip of my tongue and demanding to be set free.

Is he okay? How is he holding up?

But Lucien is no longer any of my business. That's the one thing I need to remember here if I want to stay sane. Which I do. So I clear my throat, double check that there's no one following us and do my best to sound crisp and intelligent as a new thought hits me.

"Hang on," I say. "Why were you even here outside Mrs. Hooper's brownstone just now?"

There's an awkward silence while the two men exchange a swift and uncomfortable look.

"Lucien wanted someone to have eyes on you," Hank says reluctantly. "In case, ah, anything popped off."

I frown. Something about that anything doesn't sound quite right. "Anything? He knew the paparazzi would show up, you mean?"

"Or any sort of problem," he says, but he's way too airy suddenly. I can almost see him waving his fingers at me and telling me there's nothing to see here the way Obi-Wan Kenobi did to the nosy storm troopers in Star Wars.

"So...How long have you been out there?" A new thought hits me. "Not since I left Ackerley the other day? You haven't been guarding the brownstone this whole time, have you?"

Hank's face now remains resolutely facing forward as he clears his throat. I lean

sideways to make sure I don't miss any change in his expression. And, sure enough, bright color rises over his cheeks. He clears his throat again.

“Lucien wants to make sure nothing happens to you. That's how he is. You didn't think he'd send you out into the world with Ravenna on the loose without protection, did you? You know him better than that by now.”

I slump back against my seat, stunned, because that's exactly what I'd just begun to suspect. And here's further proof — as if I needed any — that I don't know a damn thing about Lucien Winter.

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He told me he didn't love me. Didn't want me. Kicked me out.

Then sent people to protect me. Without telling me.

It doesn't mean anything, I tell myself. Just another of his manipulations. Another patented Lucien Winter mind fuck. Just because he didn't want Ravenna to have a clear shot at trying to kill me again doesn't mean that he does give a fuck about me.

And yet...

I remember the night we met when the two of us talked for hours on the plane before I stretched out and went to sleep. I felt as though he might be watching over me. I felt...peaceful. Despite everything that's happened between us since then, I've got to admit that it was a good feeling. I felt safe and protected because Lucien is not the kind of man to let things fall through the cracks. Not on his watch. Not if he can help it.

And I feel grateful and protected now.

"Thanks for the rescue, guys," I say quietly. "I appreciate it. I'm not sure what would've happened if you hadn't shown up when you did."

Hank chuckles. "From what I saw? You did just fine with your no comment. You strike me as the kind of person who does a pretty good job of taking care of herself. But Lucien can do it better."

I repress a snort with difficulty. Sure, chief. Lucien's great at protecting me. From

outside forces, anyway. But protecting me from the damage that he can cause? I put him firmly in the dismal failure category.

We turn a corner and it dawns on me that I have no idea where we're going. "If you can just drop me off at the park, that would be great. I was headed for a jog."

Hank shoots me a "are you crazy?" look over his shoulder. "No can do. You're coming with us."

My jaw drops. My gut lurches. "Say what, now?"

"Lucien wants us to bring you back to Ackerley as soon as you throw a few things in a bag," Hank says.

This news hits me like a nice blast from a fireman's hose straight to the face, and I react accordingly by making a choked sound. "Absolutely not. You can just let me out right here. I'll be fine. Thanks for the help. Gotta go."

Sighing, the men exchange a weary sidelong glance. Hank sends me a placating look. "I'm just trying to do my job, Tamsyn. I've got my orders."

I hesitate for a beat or two, grappling with a furious jumble of words that I'm dying to let loose. This messy situation is not Hank's fault. I know that. But I am so sick of the great and powerful Lucien Winter throwing his weight and money around and manipulating my life. I am so sick of being a tiny pawn piece on the massive chessboard of his life. Fuck this. He doesn't get to kick me out on the curb and then swoop me back into his twisted world a few days later. There's no way I can risk him looking into my eyes, which are bloodshot and swollen from all the buckets of heartbroken tears I've cried on his behalf. No way he gets to see the hollows and dark smudges from lack of sleep.

There's no way in hell.

"You seem like a nice guy," I tell Hank, deadly serious as I stare him in the face. "I understand that you're just doing your job. But I am not returning to Ackerley under any circumstances. So unless you plan to kidnap me, your orders from Lucien fucking Winter sound like a you problem."

The men both exhale a beleaguered sigh, then quickly cringe when Hank's phone rings. "Speak of the devil," Hank mutters, pulling it out and holding it to his ear with all the enthusiasm of a man raising a spitting cobra to his head. "Yeah, boss."

Hank listens and shifts uncomfortably, his face losing some of its color. "Sorry it took so long to get back to— yeah, we got her. She's fine. No, she's fine. The paps jostled her a little, but it's all good." Hank listens again. I hear the rough bark of Lucien's voice over the line but can't make out his words. "Lucien. She's okay. I swear. Not a scratch on her. Yeah, you're right. We shouldn't have let the paps get that close." More listening. "Yeah, I'd prefer if you didn't fire my ass, but we can talk about that later. We've got bigger problems right now. You were right. She says she's not coming."

I sit there impotently in the lengthy and fraught silence that follows, my thundering heart threatening to make me pass out. Lucien and I haven't been this close since he dumped me. In no way, shape or form am I ready for this moment of having only one degree of separation between us. He's suddenly way too close. Far too powerful with too much might on his side. And I don't need to hear the exact wording of his eventual angry command from the other side of the phone to know what's coming next. My dread spikes accordingly.

Hank holds out his phone to me, looking apologetic but resolute. "Lucien wants to talk to you."

“No,” I say as firmly as I can, but I sound ridiculous to my own ears. Like a cranky toddler refusing to go down for her nap. “It’s not happening.”

Another booming communique issues from the phone. This time I have no difficulty hearing Lucien’s words. Hell, they can probably hear them all up and down Madison Avenue as we roll along.

“Put me on speaker.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Hank hits a button and holds the phone toward me with asorry, but what can I do?shrug.

I freeze and resist the sudden wild urge to throw myself out of the moving car. Anything to get away from Lucien and whatever he’s got planned for me next.

“I know you can hear me, Ms. Scott,” he says with absolute calm and awful finality. The familiar sound of his deep voice rips open something deep inside me, causing it to bleed anew. I’ve missed him. I hate myself for it, but I have. Every day without him in my life has felt like a thousand years of seething purgatory. “You need to come back to Ackerley.”

I hike up my chin and turn away from the phone, as desperate to put some distance between us as I am to sound like a powerful adult woman rather than some heartbroken waif with no control over her own life and emotions. I’ve got to put some distance between myself and him if I hope to get my life back. “No thanks. I’m safe here.”

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Long pause.

Lucien clears his throat. “I don’t think you understand. The paps aren’t going away now that they’ve found you. More of them will come. You’re under siege. Do you really think Mrs. Hooper and her fancy neighbors want you destroying the peace of their quiet Upper East Side street?”

Oh, shit.

My heart sinks because I hadn’t thought of that. Mrs. Hooper is moving soon. She needs to stage the house and get it listed. She doesn’t need commotion right now. “It’ll die down.”

A disapproving rumble from Lucien. “You’re deluded. You’re not used to this kind of thing, but the press will be all over the story for the duration. That’s why you need to come back to Ackerley where I can keep you safe and we can figure out what our press strategy is going to be. And our legal strategy.”

Oh, God.

I’m just a nurse. Just a newly minted and lowly RN. I barely have a big girl credit card. How have I landed myself in this kind of mess? Even so, I can’t go back there. I love him too much. He affects me too profoundly. Even now, my racing heart is headed toward cardiac arrest territory, and he’s not even in the same room as me. Going back there will ruin the little bit of me that’s left. “No, thanks. Last time I was at Ackerley, someone tried to kill me. I feel safer on the mean streets of Manhattan.”

The funniest thing happens then. Lucien laughs. The sound is hard and bitter. Unexpected. But it plucks on some strings inside me that only he can reach. “You’re nothing if not predictable, Ms. Scott,” he says, his laughter fading away. “I knew you would say that. And you probably know that I’m going to say this.”

I hold my breath and wait while dread tiptoes its prickly feet up my nape and across my scalp.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Ms. Scott.” Lucien’s voice is full of silky menace. “If you’re not here by the end of the day, our next interaction will be me landing my helicopter on the roof of Mrs. Hooper’s brownstone and extracting you like a Seal Team Six operative.”

Oh, God. He’d do it, too. Worse, he’d probably bark a command at my rescuers here and seamlessly use their undying loyalty to execute a kidnapping. They’re all ex-military, as I recall. They’ve got the training. Hell, there’s nothing to stop them from doing it now if he snapped his fingers and gave the signal. Guys like this get things done. Guys like this probably have the skill set to take care of Ravenna for him. So what do I think I’m going to do? Fold my arms, stamp my foot and glare hard enough for them to let me go? Hop out of the speeding car, run away and go into hiding for the foreseeable future? Yeah, no. And I don’t want to test the full might of Lucien’s power. Still, I’m not going to just roll over and do what Lucien tells me to do because he told me to do it.

“You’re threatening me now?” I say.

“Absolutely, Ms. Scott. I hope I’m making myself clear about what I’m prepared to do to get you back.” He pauses and clears his throat. Maybe he heard the same funny note in his voice that I just did. “At Ackerley, I mean.”

I’ve had enough. “Listen, Lucien, I don’t know who you think you are, but you?—”

He hangs up on me and my mushrooming outrage, robbing me of the opportunity to get in the last word and tell him to go fuck himself, which is what I'd planned to do.

4

Lucien

Early that afternoon, I convene in my study with my younger brother, Roman, and my new criminal defense attorney, Grayson Stanwyck, the son of Stanwyck & Son law firm. His father was a great friend of my father and handled most of my family's legal affairs. Still does. Gray, here, is an old school friend of mine and Roman's who went into the criminal side of his father's firm. We see each other at the club or the gym. We play polo together. I never thought I'd need him to save me from jail.

Times change.

It's already been a long day and the afternoon has barely begun. I don't have much more juice available to defend myself to these two. Who knew Gray was such a pit bull on the job? I'd much prefer a genteel discussion with his old man to this ongoing interrogation and their disapproving faces.

"You shouldn't have talked to the police is all I'm saying, Lucien," Gray says for roughly the tenth time. "That's basic. I don't understand what you were thinking. That's what you pay the firm for. To run this kind of interference for you. Now you're tied to the version of events you gave them."

I scowl. "I wanted to know what happened to Ravenna. They wanted to know my whereabouts. I told them the truth and we exchanged information. End of story."

Gray barks out an incredulous laugh. "The truth? You've locked yourself into a timeline. And we don't even know what time Ravenna died. You're tying my hands

here. I haven't even had a chance to get started."

I slump back in my desk chair and swivel so I can keep an eye out the window and on the driveway. Where there is a great but depressing view of the burned-out guest cottage but currently no sign of Tamsyn's arrival. Even though I'd vehemently hoped she'd be here by now.

I'm hit with the sudden urge to drive my fist through said glass. Luckily, the thought of wasting the rest of the day in the ER getting stitches forces me to get my shit together. But it doesn't make me any less eager to see Tamsyn again.

Shrugging irritably, I yank my attention away from the scene outside and try to focus on Gray. Roman, who's sitting at the far end of the sofa and looking at me as though I've started using crayons to sign all my important documents, I ignore. "What do you want me to say?"

"Start with saying you'll never do it again," Gray says.

With that, I hit the limit of my patience. "It's over," I snap. "I did it. I shouldn't have. It won't happen again. Let's move on."

Gray looks flinty and skeptical, but thankfully lets it drop. "Great. Appreciate it."

"Shifting gears, I think we should expect the police to?"

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I cut him off because there's only one thing I give a shit about at the moment. "My girlfriend Tamsyn will also need an attorney if the police want to talk to her, which I assume they will," I say, voicing one of my biggest concerns. I do not want her badgered or harassed. I want her protected. "Is there someone else at the firm who can represent her if push comes to shove?"

Roman sits up straight and raises his hand before Gray can answer. His look of bright innocence doesn't fool me for a second. "I thought she was your former girlfriend..."

Now is not the time for this clown and his needling. He's spent a healthy portion of the last several days telling me I made the worst mistake of my life by letting Tamsyn go. I don't want to hear it again now. "Shut the fuck up or get the fuck out."

Having proved his point, Roman represses a smirk with difficulty, lowers his hand and eases back against the cushions.

"I have another partner for Tamsyn, sure." Gray says. Thoughtful pause. "Forgive me for asking, but are you sure you know her well enough to know that she didn't —"

That's more than enough to get me flared up again. I lean in and point my finger across the desk at his face. "Listen to me," I say around gritted teeth. "She had nothing to do with Ravenna's death. She is above suspicion, so let's get that straight. I want to make sure that she stays out of trouble —"

The sudden sound of a car outside the window behind me snaps me out of what was shaping up to be quite a tirade. I quickly look around, knocking over my desk clock in the process, and see the SUV pull up.

Thank fuck. It's her.

Doors open. Tamsyn gets out.

I freeze, my heart lurching into overdrive.

She's wearing one of her little summer dresses, something blue that skims her shoulders and makes me remember our time together in Monte Carlo. She's pulled her sandy curls back into a ponytail. Her face is downturned and resolute behind her sunglasses as she grabs her purse and waits for Hank to retrieve her luggage from the trunk. Then she glances up at the house and heads toward the front door with all the enthusiasm of a dolphin swimming with a pod of orcas.

Oh, and the little necklace I gave her with the car charm? It's gone. I assume she ripped it off her neck, spat on it and flushed it down the toilet at the first opportunity so she'd have no physical remnants of me. My mood sours even further.

I stand and crane my neck to keep her in sight for as long as possible, beyond caring about the audience behind me or whether she sees me watching her. Beyond pride or embarrassment. That's how glad I am that she's here—I can't breathe with it. Yet I also feel as though I can finally breathe now that I've laid eyes on her again. As though my lungs only inflate fully when she's somewhere nearby, and she carries all the keys and secrets to my existence in her purse with her.

My relief is so overpowering that I almost slip up and say what I'm thinking aloud:

Thank God she's back. Thank God she came back.

I'm also glad she made things easy on me and came back voluntarily. I'm not sure what I would have done otherwise—that Seal Team Six threat wasn't as much of an exaggeration as it should have been—but I would have done it. Trust me when I say

that.

Someone loudly clears their throat behind me. I turn away from the window, cheeks burning. “We need to wrap up this meeting. Are we done here?”

“We’re done,” Gray says, watching me with open speculation as he also stands and reaches across the desk to shake my hand. “We’ll stay in touch. And I’ll call Detective Smith to let her know I’m on the case and she shouldn’t have any more impromptu discussions with you without me.”

“And the lawyer for Tamsyn,” I remind him.

“Relax,” he says, shooting a startled sidelong glance at Roman. Neither of them seems to be a big fan of my vehemence where Tamsyn’s concerned, but I don’t give a fuck. “I told you. It’s under control. Relax.”

“Good man,” I say, nodding.

He leaves. I’m on the verge of following him and trying to intercept Tamsyn before she goes upstairs and retreats into her bedroom when Roman stands and comes over to stare me down with the kind of unblinking no nonsense look that Dad used to shoot us when we got into shenanigans. Like the time he caught the two of us and our partner in crime, Daniel, arriving back home after taking his Ferrari for an unauthorized spin.

I stiffen and wait.

“Do us all a favor, Lucien,” Roman says. “Get her back. You’re a mess without her.”

Heat rushes up my neck and over my cheeks until it burns the tips of my ears. I may be a mess without her, but it’s rude of him to notice and unforgivable for him to

mention it. I open my mouth to issue some sort of denial, but he cuts me off my clapping his hands to either side of my face. Hard.

“Spare me the denials,” he says with a flinty smile. “Neither one of us believe them.”

He walks off. I’ve never been so happy to see the back of anyone in my life. I have a couple seconds alone to get my thought together before Hank comes in trailed by Ted Winwood, another member of my security team, and Daniel Evans, my estate manager, lifelong friend and Ferrari-stealing accomplice. He grew up here at Ackerley and took over his father’s duties when he died.

I focus on Hank first. “Thanks for grabbing Tamsyn for me,” I say. “How is she?”

“You heard her on the phone,” he says with a rueful laugh. “She’s pissed. God help you.”

“Indeed.” I turn to Winwood because I want to get right to the point. “I want to know how Ravenna got onto the property the other night when she set the fire. What have you found out?”

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“We’ve been over this, sir,” Winwood says. “As I told you —”

“Drop the bullshit and tell me again,” I say. “You didn’t see any sign of Ravenna when you swept the grounds that night?”

“No,” Winwood says, calm and unblinking. He’s his usual sincere and professional ex-military self, but what else would he say if he wants to keep his job with me but knows he dropped the ball and let Ravenna back onto my property after I’d banned her and he was in charge that night? “I checked the grounds personally. You saw me. We checked the video feeds in the office. Someone had eyes on the cameras at all times. There was no sign of her.”

“So how the fuck did she get back on the grounds?” I say. “Teleportation? Parachute drop? She got here somehow. Check the feeds again. The police are going to want to see them. They’re probably getting a warrant for them as we speak. I want to know what they show before we hand them over.”

Got it,” Winwood says with a crisp nod.

“Get to it,” I say, jerking my head toward the study door.

“Sir,” he says, military bearing in full effect as he pivots and walks off.

I turn to Hank and Daniel, both of whom have been here longer than Winwood. “I’m not sure I trust him,” I say, lowering my voice and staring after the departing Winwood. “I want you to oversee the review of the video feeds, Hank. Keep an eye on him.”

Hank looks startled. "I'll do what I can, but he's the technical guy."

"Just do it," I tell him.

"You got it," he says, also walking off.

Daniel opens his mouth but hesitates.

"What?" I say.

He shakes his head, frowning. "I've been kicking myself for not mentioning this sooner. I'm not trying to get anyone fired. I want you to know that."

"But...?"

"But why was I the one who found Ravenna the night she came back? If Winwood and his team are so well trained and highly qualified, why did they miss all signs of her? I only stumbled on her because I was checking on the boats in the storm."

I nod. He's not telling me anything I haven't thought of myself. It's another reason I want Hank to keep an eye on Winwood. "Got it. Thanks." I start to walk off, but the look on Daniel's face stops me. He looks like he's struggling with something major. Something he doesn't want to tell me. "What else?"

He blows out a breath. "I saw Winwood talking to Ravenna the other day before you kicked her out. They seemed a little, ah, friendly."

I stiffen even though this information does not surprise me in the slightest. I should have known. Daniel has had my back my whole life. Like the time he gave me the heads-up that one of our teammates on our middle school soccer team—this was back before Roman and I went to boarding school and Daniel went to the local high

school—tried to make moves on my little girlfriend. I put the kibosh on that and Daniel earned my heartfelt gratitude. As for Ravenna? Let's just say it never took her very long to zero in on a handsome man in the group. She was as predictable as death and taxes. "Where was this?"

"I saw them pass each other in the driveway," Daniel says, frowning at the memory. "She was on her way to the guest cottage, I think."

"What were they talking about?"

"I was too far away to hear. I hate to be the bearer of this kind of news."

"Don't worry about it. I appreciate your loyalty," I say, clapping him on the back and quickly walking out. I can't shove this Ravenna bullshit out of my mind fast enough. I'm dying to see Tamsyn.

I head for the staircase. She's probably up in her yellow bedroom, barricading the door against me so she doesn't have to deal with me. Which is exactly what I deserve after the way I treated her. But a few steps up, I hear the mellow sound of her voice and a tinkle of laughter.

Dining room. Lunch buffet.

I recalibrate and pivot, going back down and straight across the foyer to the dining room.

That's when my nerves stall out. I pause on the threshold, staying out of her line of sight and giving myself a beat or two to soak her in and think of something to say as she smiles after the departing chef and helps herself to a plate.

Everything inside me aches with longing at the sight of her.

Her spine is straight, her shoulders squared and her head held high. I have no idea how this twenty-two-year-old is so strong and self-possessed, but she is. She doesn't look heartbroken or even mildly upset about our breakup. She looks fine. She also smells fantastic, with a liberal spritzing of the lily of the valley perfume I bought her back in Monte Carlo. The scent torments me. I want to bury my face in her neck and get drunk off it. Maybe she wore it as a nicefuck you to me. I'll give her the win on that one if she did. It's damn effective.

I miss you, Tamsyn. I want you. I need you.

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It's all right there. Trapped behind the wall I built between us.

I clear my throat, startling her. "Ms. Scott."

She pauses in her careful selection of chicken breasts for her salad to spare me a quick sidelong glance that barely touches my face. "Lucien."

"You came."

She shrugs, moving along the sideboard to the salad dressings and picking one to drizzle. "Like you said, I can't impose on Mrs. Hooper. She's trying to sell her brownstone and doesn't need the commotion—oh, look, chocolate chip cookies today. Perfect."

I hesitate, frowning. I didn't expect her to greet me with open arms, of course, but I also didn't expect this... this... cool indifference. Where is her hurt? Her anger? Was I that effective at killing her feelings for me?

"So..." I choose my words carefully, determined not to rock any boats. She came back. She isn't trying to beat me about the head and neck with a fireplace poker and calling me a heartless monster. That's winning in my book. "This is okay?"

"It's fine." She helps herself to silverware and a linen napkin, looking politely puzzled by the question as she heads for the staircase. "Ackerley is a big estate. Plenty of room for me to stay out of your hair."

"What happened to your necklace?" The ridiculousness of the question isn't lost on

me as I bark the words out, but I don't let that stop me. In a world that's caving in around me, the missing trinket I gave Tamsyn isn't exactly the biggest issue. But the naked notch between her collarbones where the little car charm used to rest is as jarring as the Louvre with a faded patch on the wall where the Mona Lisa once hung.

The question seems to startle her. "I'm not wearing it."

"I know. That's why I asked."

I don't mean for my words to sound so harsh. Nor do I mean to act like an asshole. What can I say? Some things just come naturally to me at the worst possible times.

"I'm happy to give it back," she says. "I should have given it to you when I gave back your mother's diamond studs."

"I don't want it back."

A shrug of absolute indifference. A dagger straight through my heart. "Suit yourself," she says, and she's off. Leaving me staring after her with a gaping wound in my chest and a growing knot in my gut.

Don't let her go says that persistent voice in my head. The one that only speaks when I'm in danger of fucking things up with her. "Tamsyn..."

She hesitates, presenting me with her pretty profile over the sweet curve of her shoulder, not looking at me and not bothering to hide her rising impatience. She's more interested in eating her lunch than she is in occupying the same room with me. I am reaping what I have sown. And I'm choking on it. So there I am. With my dick in my hand and no idea what to say to her, or even where to begin.

"Maybe we should talk," I finally say.

Her brows go up. “Talk?”

“Yes, talk.”

“About what, pray tell?”

The question of the day. I wouldn’t know where to start. With me thanking her for coming? Begging her for forgiveness? Assuring her that I had nothing to do with Ravenna’s death? My shot clock is winding down to double zero and all I’ve got is an empty head with no strategy and a crater inside me where her love used to fill me up. “How are you?”

A flicker of scorn crosses her expression. “Never better. And there’s nothing to talk about. You’ve already said it all.”

And there goes my buzzer. She turns and walks off without another word.

5

Tamsyn

It’s after ten now. I’m showered, lotioned and ready for a couple of hours reading peacefully in bed after a long and stressful day. Until a matter of extreme urgency propels me out of the safe and Lucien-free cocoon of my French country chic yellow bedroom: I could really use a stiff drink. During my time with Lucien, I’ve developed a taste for his whiskey. Another thing he’s taught me to love, along with caviar, bouillabaisse, and his extremely talented hands, mouth and dick. Most of that is off the menu for me now, but he keeps plenty of whiskey and I plan to get some.

Oh, and there’s another matter of urgency: I have nothing to read.

When I unceremoniously vacated the house the other day, I left behind the collection of historical romance novels that Lucien stocked on my bookshelf for me when I first came to Ackerley. I checked all over the bedroom after lunch earlier, but they were nowhere to be found. I suppose he packed them up to send to me at Mrs. Hooper's or maybe donate to charity now that we're no longer together. Although, now that I think about it, he did leave the collection of rainbow-colored Chuck Taylor sneakers in the closet for me. They were another Welcome to Ackerley gift. So my whole theory about him not wanting any reminders of me around the house kind of falls apart, doesn't it? Not that it matters. I've long since learned that I don't understand the first thing about Lucien Winter and his thought processes and never will.

All I know right now is that I need a drink and a book.

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Luckily, I can find both in the library downstairs. As long as I don't run into Lucien, I've got a perfect plan.

I tiptoe out of the bedroom and set off down the long and chilly hallway, guided by the occasional softly lit wall sconce and propelled by the prickles running up and down my spine. Ackerley descends into an eerie silence every night once the staff goes home. The common spaces always creep me out a little. The occasional floor squeak gets magnified somehow. Shadows stretch and seem to press closer on all sides just out of your field of vision. Worst of all, you feel like eyes are watching you the whole time. If it's not a member of staff peering around a corner or a security guy watching you on the video feed, then it's gotta be the portraits lining the walls. Plus, there's a scent in the air tonight. Something sophisticated and oriental, like some high-end perfume that they keep behind the glass cases at Bergdorf's. Not exactly the kind of thing the maids would wear or you'd find in a plug-in air freshener.

And I don't care if that makes me sound like Shaggy or Daphne from Scooby-Doo. I'm not crazy. I feel what I feel. I smell what I smell.

If Lucien ever loses his fortune, God forbid, he'll quickly make another one by opening the house for scares every Halloween. It wouldn't surprise me if the place had a ghost or two drifting along dark ceiling corners with the crown molding, watching the living. Maybe they are up there welcoming Ravenna to their ranks right now.

The most unsettling thing about Ackerley is that it's hard not to let your imagination run away with you when you're here and alone with your thoughts. But I can't let myself go wild. I know that. There's nothing crazy going on here. Nothing

supernatural, anyway. It's just a big house with tall ceilings, priceless antiques, ornate drapes and echoing staircases. I need to remember that and not let my jangled nerves get the best of me.

I make it downstairs and head down yet another long hallway to the library. No signs of life anywhere. I'm turning into the library and congratulating myself on a perfectly executed plan when a sudden shiver of awareness along my nape stops me in my tracks. There's a fire crackling in the fireplace. Not the kind of thing I expected, but the summer night is unexpectedly cool. And the weirdness doesn't stop there. My beloved historical romance books are prominently stacked in a large pyramid in the middle of the coffee table, directly in my line of sight. My heart is already sinking by the time I hear the creak of leather behind me and Lucien's voice, deep and velvety.

"About time."

I shoot him a quick and annoyed glance over my shoulder, my startled heart alternately racing through and skipping beats because the scene is cozy and sexy. The perfect setting for a seduction, and he's the Seducer in Chief even if I remind myself not to become the willing seduce-ee. He's sitting in the tall wingback chair in the corner, one ankle crossed over the other knee and an arm draped over the chair's arm. His father's gold signet ring, the one I put on him the other day, glints in the flickering firelight. His strong fingers hold a crystal tumbler of what I'm sure is the exact whiskey I came down here looking for. Shadows perversely keep most of his face dark but allow the gleam of his eyes to shine through, strong and bright.

My equilibrium shifts a bit more off kilter.

But I'm committed to my performance as an indifferent former girlfriend, a role I feel I inhabited well this afternoon when I first saw him again. So I keep my head up and go directly to my books on the coffee table, taking my time looking through them and checking the spines.

“What are you doing here?” I say without looking at him.

“Waiting for you.”

I should have known. I can’t say I’m surprised. “Is that why you moved my books down here?”

“Yep,” he says, not bothering to disguise the low hum of satisfaction in his voice.

It’s late and I’m tired. He affects me no matter how much I try to resist his power. It’s like he emits some irresistible pheromone that slips under my skin and makes my blood sizzle and my pussy and nipples tighten anytime he’s in the vicinity. All those factors combine to make it hard for me to either maintain my aloof routine or hide my annoyance as my head snaps up and I glare at him.

He shifts in the chair, coming into the light from the lamp on the nearby console as he rests his elbows on his knees and stares at me. He doesn’t look great. I noticed that right away when I saw him earlier. He’s hollow eyed and his cheekbones stand out in starker lines than normal. His dark hair, normally so sleek, looks ruffled now, making me think he’s been running his hands through it. He’s waiting. Expectant. And I’ll be damned to an eternity in hell before I give him the satisfaction of revealing the depth of my heartbreak to him.

“What you want, Lucien?” I say, keeping my voice even.

“To talk to you.”

Irritable shrug from me. “Why the manipulation with my books? Why not a simple request?”

Those heavy brows of his sink low over his eyes. “Why waste time with that? So you

can refuse the way you tried to refuse my request for you to come back here? The way you refused my request to talk to you earlier?”

“You can’t blame me for that. Our last real talk didn’t go so well as I recall.”

There’s a long and painful pause followed by a crooked smile from him. “Ms. Scott. Will you do me the honor of joining me in a drink so I can talk to you?”

A drink?—?

He really is unbelievable. His arrogance knows no bounds. I’ve always known that about him. I wonder why I still find it so compelling. “I’m not having a drink with you.”

Now finished with my selection of some books, I straighten and take a couple of purposeful steps back toward the door. A mistake, as it turns out. Because he chooses that exact moment to unfold his big and lean body from his chair and cross to the drink cart behind me on a trajectory that causes him to brush my shoulder as he passes. And I could have moved. I admit that. But I’m too proud to give him the satisfaction of knowing gets to me. Too hungry for even the tiniest hit of his latent energy and heat from his body. He delivers both in spades, along with a subtle hint of his clean and woodsy cologne that makes my nostrils dilate and my breath catch.

“Why not?” he says as he continues on his way, thankfully releasing me from the force field of his body. “You look as wired as I feel. It’s been a busy day. You like whiskey before bed the same as I do.”

He grabs another tumbler from the drink cart and splashes both glasses with a couple of fingers. My mouth waters, although whether it’s from the promise of whiskey or him is anybody’s guess. And I still don’t leave. When he comes back and offers me a glass, I take it with my free hand. But I don’t drink it in front of him. I don’t want to

give him another win when I know he's whittling away at my self-restraint, corrupting me bit by bit.

He wants me back, to fuck me if nothing else. He's not going to, though. Even I am not that stupid.

"Why did you come back, Ms. Scott?" he says, lingering in my space rather than heading back to his chair.

"I told you."

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“I see.” He sips his drink, muscles flexing in the strong column of his throat. “Not because you wanted to see me?”

Seething now, I fight the wild urge to toss my drink in his face. But that would be a waste of very fine whiskey. It would give me tremendous satisfaction, though. The galling arrogance. The unerring accuracy of his observations. I could kill him. Because he’s right. I did want to see him. That’s why I’m here. Bottom line. Despite all my self-protective instincts desperately waving giant red flags at me.

I came back because I missed him. I’m here because I wanted to see him. But fuck him.

Fuck. Him.

I fake a yawn. “You always were your own biggest fan, weren’t you? What do you need to talk to me about, Lucien? It’s late. I’m tired.”

He hesitates, his jaw darkening. “Ravenna is dead. Really dead this time.”

I open my mouth, but it takes me a long time to fish out something to say that feels right but honest. “I know. I can’t quite bring myself to offer condolences.”

Wry smile. “Understandable. I’m planning her funeral. Let’s just say it’s strange worrying about flowers when what I really want to do is ask the coroner if I can drive a stake through her heart to make sure there’s no chance of another resurrection.”

I grimace. “Understandable.”

He pauses. “The police probably think I did it. Or hired someone to do it.”

I wait for his denial, but he doesn't offer one. So the question hangs in the air. No matter what happened to Ravenna, it looks bad for Lucien. I know that. It always looks bad for the spouse of the murdered person.

And then a bunch of unwanted memories crowd into the forefront of my mind. Like his blind fury when he kicked Ravenna out of the house and again when she set the fire. He'd looked enraged both times.

No, not enraged. Murderous. Yet I've never been afraid of him.

Maybe I should be. He's big enough to hurt a woman. Strong enough. Powerful enough.

I don't want to look directly at him, but I find myself searching his face as we stand there in a strained silence. I need reassurance. I need to know that while he may be an asshole, he's not a wife killer and never would be under any circumstances. I want him to say he didn't do it, but he doesn't. Maybe he wants me to tell him I don't think that he did it, but I don't. I'm not sure I could even if I was willing to give him the satisfaction.

What does that mean? What does that say about either of us? I don't know. And it's far too late to matter anyway. There's too much water under our bridge. But it seems like another death knell for our relationship, such as it was.

Maybe what I'm truly afraid of is that I'd understand if he killed Ravenna in a heat of the moment situation. Isn't that my all-time worst case scenario? That I'll always love him and find a way to forgive him no matter what cruel acts he commits?

A shiver runs through me at the thought. But I can't look away.

He stares back, that unfathomable gaze locked in on me. I feel that pull to him again, and it's not just physical this time. I'm scared for him even if I'm not scared of him. I hate him, yeah, but I don't want to see him in prison. I also don't want to give him any fuel, but I want to know. I need to know.

"Do you have a good lawyer?" I ask quietly.

Something eases in his expression. "The best."

I nod, commanding myself to be satisfied with this answer and to leave it alone. "So you'll be fine. Rich people always get off, don't they?"

"Guess we'll find out." His jaw tightens. "Tamsyn... About what I said. The day you left."

This reminder of that ugly scene is just the ice water I need to run through my veins and cool me off a little. Hell, I'm grateful for it. "It's fine. You did me a favor."

He grimaces and cocks his ear. "A favor?"

"It never would have worked between us. We both know it."

"Oh?"

"I want a real relationship. A real life with someone." I give him a pointed once over. "You want new chess pieces to play with when you get bored. I'm over being a chess piece. Not that it wasn't fun while it lasted. Are we done?"

He stiffens, his face flooding with color. "I never saw you as a chess piece."

That gets an unwilling bark of laughter out of me. "We disagree, but it doesn't matter.

Like I said, we can stay out of each other's way while I'm here. I'm sure we'll barely see each other, anyway. And I won't be here for long. Hopefully."

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With that, I take great pleasure in turning my back on him and striding off with my drink and my books before he can get another word out.

6

Tamsyn

I can't stay here.

The idea keeps me awake all night and powers me through getting dressed and throwing my hair into another ponytail early the next morning. It pokes me between the shoulder blades and taunts me when I stand at my sunny window and hide behind my curtains watching Lucien set out for his morning jog, his face hard and set as he pounds toward the dock.

You must get out of here, Tamsyn. Ackerley is not for you.

The voice is right. I know it is. This renewed exposure to Lucien is dangerous to me. Of course it is. It's like a daily hit of asbestos or drink of lead contaminated water. Worse, it's like a snort of cocaine when I know I'm addicted. Everything about this scenario is bad for me, and if I need any further proof, it's right here in the body that doesn't even feel like mine anymore. My stomach is knotted up. My skin is too tight. Unwanted thoughts buzz around my head like hornets in a shaken jar.

I need a recap since I'm having trouble remembering the events of the recent past. Something to knock some sense back into me. So here goes:

Lucien treated me like a moldering pile of garbage smelling up his dining room the other day when he dumped me. The wound is still fresh and oozing inside my chest. Yet last night, when he hit me with those smoldering eyes and acted kinda sorta sorry about the whole thing, I lapsed into a sudden catastrophic case of amnesia. Now here I am trying to figure out what he's thinking. What he really wanted to say to me and would have confessed if I'd given him the chance. I'm wondering if I should open the door—just a tiny little crack—toward forgiving him. Or at least letting him fuck me once or twice more for old time's sake.

And all of this is happening while his newly dead wife lies on a slab in the coroner's office refrigerator and suspicion hangs over his head. Lucien Winter may be a murderer for all I know. But when I'm with him—when I'm mesmerized by his magnetism—I can't make myself care about any of that.

How sick does that make me?

I step away from the curtain, hungry for the sight of Lucien's departing back and disgusted with myself. I knew I shouldn't come here, but I wanted to see him and let myself be talked into it. Well, now I've seen him. Now it's time for me to make a new plan. And I thought of it during the dark hours of the night when my overheated body refused to let me sleep. I'm going to call the head of my department at the hospital and ask if I can start my job a few weeks early. My contract says September 1 but fuck that. If I start early, I'll have the money to pay to rent a room or an Air B & B until my apartment is ready. I won't have to inconvenience Mrs. Hooper or go to Florida with her and Penny.

I can use my credit card to pay for things as needed. Although my spending limit has training wheels on it and the cost of living in the city is crazy expensive. Still, doing things this way will keep me independent of both Lucien and Mrs. Hooper. I call that a win.

And now that Lucien's out of the house for at least an hour, I can safely head downstairs and grab some breakfast without threat of him lurking near the coffee and twinkling those magnetic eyes at me. Another win.

I leave my room and head for the staircase, but the murmur of excited female voices behind me catches my attention. I glance over my shoulder and discover that the bedroom door almost at the far end of the hall is open. I frown, trying to remember if Lucien ever showed me that bedroom. I don't think he did. And whatever's happening in there is absolutely none of my business. But I'm just nosy enough and bored enough to head in that direction anyway.

I make it to the threshold and dart out of the way just in time to avoid getting bowled over by one of the housekeeping staff hurrying by with a stack of dresses draped over her arm.

"Sorry, Ms. Scott," she calls, continuing her trajectory downstairs.

"It's okay," I say.

"Good morning, Tamsyn," calls Lucien's housekeeper, Maddie, from the depths of the room. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," I say, my jaw dropping as I realize where I am and what I'm looking at. It's a massive bedroom, as grand as the master bedroom where Lucien sleeps, with high ceilings, floor to ceiling windows framed by heavy satin drapes and a balcony overlooking the glittering bay outside. The walls are a stunning pale gray. I take a closer look. Is that silk wallpaper? Yeah. I think it is. Paisley. Exquisite. Elegant.

But the room is bare. No bed. No wardrobe, chairs or anything needed for day-to-day life. Just several long folding banquet tables set up along with racks and racks of clothes. I'm talking about the kind of racks you'd see in a major department store or

the garment district. Some of the clothes are zipped into pale gray garment bags (of course Ravenna's custom garment bags would match her bedroom decor!), all of which are embroidered with a bold and intertwined RW, as though anyone could possibly have any doubt about whose wardrobe this is. Other racks feature dresses that are arranged by rainbow color, with the reds to my left all the way over to the violets on my far right. There are stacks of giant designer boxes on the banquet tables, most of them labeled by designer. All the greats are represented here. Chanel. Dior. Schiaparelli. Dolce & Gabbana. And the biggest box of all? An open Vera Wang monstrosity overflowing with white tissue paper and gleaming folds of the richest white satin imaginable.

Ravenna's wedding dress. I stare at it feeling sick, my heartbeat a dull thump in my throat.

"I didn't expect to be doing all this today," says Maddie as she grabs a couple of dresses from the rack in front of her and drapes them over her arm. She looks harried but crisp and resigned. "But Lucien wants it taken care of, and I can't say I blame him."

I peel my attention away from the wedding dress with difficulty and find myself immediately dazzled by a purple beaded evening gown that glitters in the morning sun. I want to touch it to see how heavy it is but don't dare. I don't know why I don't, but I don't. Even so, I can only imagine how beautiful Ravenna looked in that dress with her pale skin and dark hair.

And the shoes! Row after row of killer heels lined up around the perimeter of the room, most of them red-soled. Not a pair of flats in the bunch. And no athletic shoes. Chuck Taylor would not be welcome in this crowd. I glance down at today's pale blue pair on my feet feeling as tacky and poor as I've ever felt in my life.

"What are you..." I trail off, needing a moment to clear my throat and pray that my

burning cheeks cool down a little. “What are you doing?”

Maddie uses her free hand to push a strand of hair out of her flushed face. “We discovered more of Ravenna’s clothes in the attic the other day when Lucien asked us to grab some of her things for her to wear when she left the hospital. I don’t know how all this got missed. But it’s a good thing it did because Ravenna needs something to wear for her funeral. After that, Lucien wants one of the discrete consignment stores to come in and catalog all this and sell it. I doubt anyone can come before next week. Lucien won’t love that.”

“Why not?” I say, constitutionally unable to quash my curiosity about him.

Maddie hesitates. “He doesn’t like reminders hanging around. Of his old life. You know.”

“Right.”

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“Anyway, I’ll see what I can do to get someone out here ASAP. Then he’ll donate the proceeds from the sale.”

“To what?”

“No idea,” she says, shrugging. “He has a lot of charities that he supports. And his foundation, of course.”

“Well, he’ll get a lot of proceeds from this,” I say, scanning the room again. I can’t begin to imagine the cost of everything here. Hundreds of thousands easily, I’m guessing, if not millions.

“Truer words were never spoken,” she says, heading for the door. “Did you need something? I didn’t even ask.”

“No.” I waved a hand. “I’m fine. I’m about to go down for breakfast.”

“Sounds good, she says, hurrying off. “Let me know if you need anything from me.”

I battle the uncomfortable feeling that what I really need is a few minutes alone with Ravenna’s stuff as I watch Maddie disappear down the hallway. Then I head straight for the wedding dress like the furtive jewel thief, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one’s coming. I reach out, hesitate, then decide, fuck it. What am I so worried about? That Ravenna won’t like me rifling through her things? That I’m unworthy of touching such finery? That her possessions are somehow infused with her lingering negative energy and will contaminate me? Ridiculous. Besides. Ravenna had no problem sneaking into the guest cottage and rummaging through my things, did she?

She even stole my perfume and used it to try to seduce Lucien.

Turnabout is fair play.

I unfold the dress' bodice just enough to get an appreciation for the heaviness of the silk. The fineness of the weave. The tiny perfect stitching. The lining, in Ravenna's signature pale gray.

Oh, and there's a label:

Designed for Ravenna Balfour Winter on her Wedding Day

It's the most beautiful garment I've ever seen. And it makes me feel sick, although whether it's from envy or revulsion is anyone's guess. Funny how I have both this endless fascination with Ravenna that pulls me in and a simmering dread of what she'll do next that warns me away.

She's dead, I remind myself. Dead.

I carefully replace the dress and its tissue paper before I accidentally leave a smudge on something, my pulse thumping away in my throat. Then I turn to the nearest rack. These seem to be everyday clothes—wool trousers, silk dresses in jewel tones and some blazers. I run my hand over the stunning fabrics, imagining her in them.

Oh, and there's something else, I notice. Many of the items have a dated Polaroid of Ravenna wearing the item attached to the hangar by a gray silk ribbon. And the event where she wore it written on the bottom in a bold and slashing handwriting. Ravenna's handwriting. I assume this is a practice she established to ensure she never committed the unforgivable fashion faux pas of wearing the same outfit around the same people more than once.

So there's Ravenna posing in the Chanel jacket, pouting at the camera before some women's luncheon in the city. There she is in a red tweed dress, a hand on her cocked hip and a Prada bag over her arm with Daniel on her left. That was for some charity luncheon here at Ackerley. And there—oh, God— there she is in a beaded black ball gown, her arm slung around Lucien in his tux. They're at some glittering high society function that's a million worlds away from my childhood in Brooklyn or the frat parties I went to in college. They look young and happy. The picture is a tiny little dagger to my heart. Another one. Worse, it's another reminder that I don't belong here in this rarefied world. I have no business feeling jealous about the wife of a man who rejected me so brutally. And I guess there's something else Ravenna and I have in common: when it was all said and done, Lucien didn't want either one of us. What a fucking kick in the gut.

That's when I register an elusive new detail. The faint smell of an expensive perfume seems to be everywhere and nowhere. I pick up the sleeve of the latest garment and give it a furtive sniff. It's intoxicating. Nothing that I would ever wear, but unmistakably compelling. The kind of thing you want to follow to its source.

I recognize it immediately as the sophisticated oriental scent I encountered in the hallway last night. Which is evidently, I realize with a dash of horror, Ravenna's perfume.

Get out of here, Tamsyn. Ackerley isn't for you. You've got to protect yourself?—

"The Voice of the Snake," comes a new male voice from the doorway, startling me out of my skin. Daniel's voice rather than Lucien's, thank God.

I hastily drop the sleeve, embarrassed to be caught in all my nosy glory. "What?"

"The name of Ravenna's signature perfume. Voice of the Snake. I remember when she discovered it a few years ago. At Harrod's on some trip to London, if I'm not

mistaken. She danced down the hallway spritzing it on everything. Let's just say Maddie was not thrilled."

So there it is. A perfectly reasonable explanation for me smelling it last night. I probably got a whiff of it from the curtains. Not Ravenna's ghostly presence drifting along overhead. And how appropriate that someone with Ravenna's bright green eyes and venomous disposition would be attracted to something with snake in the title. Still, "I don't remember it from when I met her."

Daniel shrugs. "She didn't have access to it. Lucien got rid of most of her personal items when she died the first time. Beautiful clothes, aren't they?"

"They are," I say, now recovered from my ridiculous case of the willies. "I've never seen anything like it."

His gaze drifts out of focus, a faint smile hovering around his lips. "He used to take her to Paris and Milan for the fashion shows. She'd order her clothes for the season. She always wanted to look her best for him. And he never spared any expense for her."

A sour taste creeps into the back of my mouth at this reminder of the perfect couple and their great love. At least in the beginning. Poor Lucien. He went from ordering the finest European couture for Ravenna to grabbing some Chuck Taylor sneakers for me. It's all I can do to hold back my hollow laugh. At least I was a cheap date. "I can imagine."

He frowns down at the floor, shaking his head. "I still remember the day Lucien brought her home to meet the family. How happy they were. How happy everyone was for them. I can't figure out how it's come to this."

"Right. Me either." I gesture toward the hallway, eager to get out of here. Between

the scent of her perfume, the sight of these exquisite clothes and the stories of ye good olde times, I've had enough of Ravenna for the day. And it's not even noon yet. "I'm going to grab some breakfast."

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Daniel snaps out of his memories, glances over his shoulder, then comes inside just as I'm walking toward the door.

"I just wanted to, ah..." he says, dropping his voice. Frowning, he runs a hand over the back of his neck, his blue eyes looking focused now and much more turbulent than usual.

Oh, God. What now? "Are you okay, Daniel? What is it?"

He shakes his head, fighting against words that don't seem to want to come. "This is none of my business," he finally says. "And it's not my place."

My dread level ratchets higher. "Okay...?"

"I just... Why are you back, Tamsyn?"

I hesitate, as thrown by the topic as I am by his sudden banked urgency. "Lucien thinks it's a good idea for now. Why? What is it?"

"I'm concerned about your safety." He makes a helpless gesture. "My loyalty is to Lucien, but I'm concerned. I'm not sure this is the place for you right now."

My heart turns to stone. It's one thing to entertain dark thoughts about Lucien in private and shameful corners of my own mind. Something entirely worse to be confronted with them by one of Lucien's lifelong friends. "Oh, my God. You think he killed Ravenna."

“I didn’t say that. But I was there when the police questioned him. And it didn’t sound good.”

“So you do think he did it.”

“I’m trying not to, Tamsyn,” he says, his voice gruff. “My father worked for their father. I grew up with Lucien and Roman. Hell, Lucien used to give me his old clothes because I needed help landing dates in high school. That’s the kind of guy he is. You think I want to have doubts about him?”

He looks and sounds as anguished as I’ve been feeling, but the damage has been done. And I’m surprised to discover that I’m angry about it. The doubts were already there in our individual thoughts. Now, by mentioning them aloud, he’s caused them to multiply exponentially. I’m not ready for that. I don’t think Lucien would murder anyone. Ever. I’m ready to swear it. But the other day I was also ready to swear that Lucien loved me as much as I loved him and look at how wrong I was about that. Lucien’s act of cruel betrayal toward me has cracked open every ounce of trust I ever had for him and turned it into dust.

“You’re supposed to be his good friend, Daniel,” I snap, part of me wondering why I’m so determined to defend a man who has been terrible to me. “You don’t know him at all if you think he’s capable of murder.”

“That’s my point, Tamsyn,” he says, his kindly tone and pained expression making everything worse. “I’m no longer sure how well I know him.”

7

Tamsyn

My interaction with Daniel kills most of my appetite, but I’ve got to do something

with my morning, so I continue downstairs anyway and just grab some yogurt, an apple and coffee from the breakfast buffet. As usual, it's laid out like some grand feast, with pastries, meats, eggs, potatoes and more items than I typically see at the hot table at my local Whole Foods back in Brooklyn. I marvel once again at the indulgence on display here, but then I put it out of my mind. Not my issue. I already know that these are rich people issues that I'll never understand.

But when I take my little breakfast and start to head back upstairs, I discover that I don't feel like being cooped up in my room. I glance around the quiet foyer, thinking hard. With Lucien jogging, Maddie and her minions occupied with Ravenna's dresses and Daniel having issued his dire warning and departed for parts unknown, it seems safe enough for me to linger downstairs long enough to eat. So I head to the solarium and settle at a little table in the corner. The beveled windowpanes give me a perfect view of the clouds cutting across Manhasset Bay. I can't quite tell if it plans to rain or not, but there's a little sailboat out in the distance that looks as though it should probably return to shore soon. But that's another thing that's not my problem.

By the time I finished eating, I'm ready to face something that is my problem: my severe lack of funds and need to start work so I can get the hell out of Ackerley as soon as possible. I can't help but think that the paparazzi issue was a manufactured excuse for Lucien to get me back to Ackerley. After all, it's more of an annoyance issue than a true safety issue, right? I know Lucien is also concerned about my possible legal jeopardy, but I don't have to live here to worry about that. And I only really agreed to come back because I wanted to see him. Well, now I've seen him. And it's been a disaster.

Time to go, Tam.

I grab my phone and dial my new boss at the hospital, expecting to get his voicemail. To my surprise, he answers on the first ring.

“Tamsyn, how are you?” booms Dr. Crawley. “Good summer so far?”

“It’s been great, thanks.” I take a deep breath and try to steady my nerves. There’s no need for me to sound this nervous. I’m just calling with a simple request. “How about you?”

“All good here. How can I help you?”

“I was wondering if it might be possible for me to start work before September 1. My summer job ended earlier than expected. Plus, I’ve had a change of my living arrangements.” I hesitate, then decide to lay it all out there. “I could use the funds, to be honest.”

I hear his answer in the pained pause before he even starts talking again. “I wish I could, Tamsyn, but the nurse you’re replacing doesn’t retire until the end of August. So I’ve got no budget for you until then. Sorry about that.”

It figures. “I totally understand.” I have a sudden flashback to the other day, when Lucien’s doctor friend offered me a job at a local hospital. I should have taken it. Look how thin jobs are on the ground now. Oh, the irony. “Have a great rest of your summer. I’ll see you on September 1.”

“See you then.”

We hang up. I swallow my disappointment and drum my fingers on the table, running through my options. This is a minor setback, but I still have options. I could check in with one of the temping agencies in the city. RNs are always in demand. Maybe someone could hire me for a few weeks. But it’s such a short timetable...Wait. I have a better idea.

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I hit another couple of buttons on my phone and call Todd, the supervisor at the campus restaurant where I worked as a server all through undergrad.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you again,” he says when I explain the situation. “I thought you were gone forever. I wish I’d known. I just hired someone new the other day. And things are quiet around here during the summer. You know that. I can’t use another server right now.”

“No worries,” I say, my morale now firmly in the negative digits. “But maybe you could keep me in mind if something opens up? I could really use the extra money right now.”

“Absolutely. Gotta go.”

“Bye,” I say, putting my phone on the table, slumping against the back of my chair and covering my face with my hands. “Shit. Fuck. Shit.Fuck.”

“It’s not that bad, is it?” comes a voice from the hallway.

Oh, God.

I drop my hands and sit up in time to see Lucien’s brother Roman stride in with his own breakfast and coffee. Rearranging my features into a pleasantnothing to see heresmile takes a bit longer because I’m so busy giving myself a swift mental kick in the ass. Why didn’t I go upstairs when I had the chance? And why is it so hard to find a quiet common space on this giant estate? That’s another of the problems with Ackerley, along with its eeriness at night: it’s overrun with Winter brothers. And

they're both hot and sexy. Roman, for example, has most of Lucien's height and broad shoulders, although he'd never be as darkly intriguing as Lucien. On the other hand, he's got an easy smile, wavy sandy hair and big blue eyes that make a lot of engaging crinkling around the corners.

"Roman. Hey." My awkwardness is intensified by the fact that I don't know him well at all. I met him the other day and spent a little time with him before my unceremonious dumping. Oh, and then there's the fact that, unbeknownst to him, Lucien and I caught a glimpse of him enjoying a vigorous menage a trois with a couple of curvy hotties out on the pool deck the other night. There's nothing like secretly seeing a man's impressive package (yes, he's got plenty to be proud of, not that I stared or anything) for making your cheeks flame and your ears burn. "Good to see you."

"Good to see you."

He puts down his plate, and there's the answer to my question about where all the food goes around here at Ackerley. He's got most of the buffet well represented on that china. Then he leans in and kisses my cheek, his lips warm and the bristle from his unshaven jaw causing little sparks of sensation along my skin. Luckily, he pulls back quickly and settles opposite me at the table, his expression open and engaging and so unlike his brother's. "I heard you were back."

"Not for long, hopefully." I give myself another swift mental quick kick. The last thing I want to do is sound ungrateful. "I don't want to impose, I mean."

"Yeah, what was all that about on the phone?" he says, shaking out his napkin and digging into his food with the gusto of a man who's missed his last five meals. "Didn't mean to overhear."

I hesitate, fighting the urge to confide in him. I need to remember who he is. His

loyalties are and always will be with Lucien. I have no real allies here at Ackerley, and I'd better remember it. "It's fine," I say, waving a hand and trying to sound upbeat about my situation. "I just want to get settled back in the city and get out of your hair as soon as possible. I'll figure something out."

He gives me an incredulous look over his sip of coffee. "Tamsyn. Look around. It's figured. We have plenty of room. You can stay here as long as you need to."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it's good for me," I say before I can stop myself.

"Oh." He nods, his expression darkening. "Well, you're being gone isn't good for Lucien."

I'd taken my own sip of coffee, but now he has my full attention. "What do you mean?" I say, trying to act like this is only of passing interest to me.

"I mean, I don't know what happened between the two of you, but he's been a fucking mess since you left. That's why I've been sticking close."

Yeah, okay. I thought he was serious. "Lucien doesn't do messes," I say around a derisive sound.

He stares at me long and hard. There seems to be a lot going on behind his eyes, but it's been long established by now that I suck at reading the Winter brothers. "You'd be surprised."

"Okay." I impatiently shake out my napkin and put it on the table, now eager to be done with this pointless conversation. I'd dying to escape back to my room, but I don't want to be rude. "If you say so."

"I'm hoping you can work things out. You're good for him, Tamsyn. He's alive

again.”

If only that were true. On the other hand, if only Roman seen how coldly Lucien excised me from his life the other day. Then he wouldn’t be talking about this nonsense. “There’s nothing to work out, Roman. And I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t want to talk about Lucien anymore. Okay?”

He leans in, hunching over the table. “Bear with me for a minute because I don’t think you understand. You light something up inside Lucien that I’ve never seen before. Don’t roll your eyes. I’m dead serious. Don’t get me wrong. I was skeptical when he told me he’d met someone. But now I’ve seen you together. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. I’ve seen the way you make him laugh. How easy the two of you are together. You think he was like that with Ravenna? Let me assure you. He wasn’t.”

I hesitate, my head spinning with all this information and my cheeks on fire. My disbelief is every bit as strong as my desperate desire for it all to be true. “You’re his wing man. You’re supposed to say stuff like that.”

“Fuck that.” Roman gives me a hard look. “Between the marriage screwing up his head and Ravenna’s unsolved disappearance tying him up in knots, I don’t think I’ve seen Lucien laugh—really laugh—in four or five years. Do you get that? My brother needs you.”

“Then why did he push me away, Roman?” I demand before I can stop myself.

“Maybe he did it to protect you. Especially after the fire. Did you ever think about that?”

I hastily look away because I have thought about it. And I don’t know if that possibility makes things better or worse. Lucien loves me but he was willing to live

his life without me? He loves me but he was willing to ruin my life by brutally rejecting me and expecting me to bounce back in a day or two? After he swooped into my life when I was minding my own business and made me love him? Made it impossible for me not to love him? How is that supposed to work?

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“Sorry, but I’m done with this conversation, Roman,” I say, working hard to avoid direct eye contact.

“Hang on,” he says sharply, eyes narrowing. “You don’t think he did it...? Is that what this is about?”

“No,” I say, frowning and shrugging, but it’s not exactly a wholehearted denial. “Not really.”

“Tamsyn. He didn’t do it. Lucien’s not a killer.” I open my mouth but he reads my mind. “And he didn’t hire anyone to do it. How could you think that? Even for one second?”

I’m ashamed of myself, but the thoughts are there. “Because I saw how much he hated her. And he’s the most powerful man I’ve ever met.”

“Tamsyn.” He takes my wrist in his hard grip. “I don’t know what happened to Ravenna, but Lucien didn’t do it. Think about it. He hated her for years before you showed up. Why would he do it now?”

Whoa. Why didn’t I think of that before? He’s got enough of a point that I feel a swoop of relief. Until I remember how enraged Lucien was when Ravenna tried to kill me. But I don’t want to mention that. It seems so overblown and self-important. Most of all, I want to cling to any theory that makes Lucien an innocent man.

“Can we move on?” I ask Roman. “It’s not even noon and my head feels like it’s exploded six or eight times already.”

A gleam of respect. “You’re the boss. Thanks for listening. What do you want to talk about?”

Sighing, I slump back against my chair again, slam all that Lucien stuff into my darkest mental closet, lock the door and swallow the key. “Well, for one thing, I need to figure out what to do with myself today. What about you? Are you headed back to the city?”

“Nope. I need to give my horse a workout.”

This information perks me right up. Lucien mentioned they have horses here, but I never got to see them. “Oh, really? You have a horse, too? Can I come with you to see him or her? I’ve never met a horse in person before.”

He snorts into his coffee, then lowers the cup and wipes his mouth. “You’ve never met a horse? How is that possible?”

“Your wealth is showing, Roman. I don’t know if you’ve ever actually been to Brooklyn, but horses are thin on the ground where I come from. They aren’t growing on trees like they are out here in Great Neck.

That gets him. He bursts into laughter. “Sorry about that. I had no idea that such third world conditions were possible in the great state of New York.”

“Well, they are,” I say, laughing with him.

Until a loud and icy new voice enters the fray. Lucien’s voice.

“What the fuck is this?” he demands.

Lucien

The surging hostility in my voice is probably unnecessary but, like everything else in my life these days, it's beyond my control. It's already been a shit day despite my best efforts, and it's not even ten in the morning. I finished my daily round of grueling exercise to manage my simmering dread (are they going to arrest me?) and growing sexual frustration about the Tamsyn situation. I whacked off in the shower so I wouldn't swallow her whole the next time I saw her. Oh, and I fielded a quick call from the office wherein my assistant offloaded more bad news to get my day started right. There are more problems with the never-ending Vanderbilt project. Upsetting market fluctuations based on my perilous legal situation. Plus, the PR folks are shitting bricks over same and want to schedule a meeting with me.

It's been wall-to-wall shit since my feet hit the floor at the crack o' dawn after a sleepless night. And now I stumble onto this cozy little scene.

It's the stuff of nightmares: Tamsyn and Roman with their heads together over a nice breakfast. Laughing. Possibly flirting, at least on Roman's end. Talking about the horses that I'd planned to show Tamsyn before the world went sideways on us.

Are. You. Fucking. Kidding. Me.

My mood isn't helped by the way their shining faces close off at the sight of me, two happy campers whose day is ruined by the arrival of the asshole counselor everyone hates. I know it's my fault with Tamsyn. I deserve it. The fact that she doesn't spit in my face every time she sees me is a miracle in itself. I'm grateful for that much grace from her. But I don't like being on the dark side of Tamsyn's moon while Roman parks his ass in the light. I don't like it at all.

"You're just in time, Lucien." Roman is all poorly concealed mischief, his shit eating grin barely contained. The two of us never quite learned how to not stick it to each

other when we're down. What can I say? Brotherly competition runs deep. And I'd do the same thing to him in a heartbeat if the roles were reversed. The fucker. "Tam wants to see the horses."

I register this use of a nickname for her the way Koreans register any movement along their demilitarized zone. It isn't an open act of war, but it's tiptoeing awfully close to the line. "I can show Tamsyn anything she needs to see," I tell him, my smile and tone as chilling as I can make them.

Bright surprise from Roman. "Really? Looks like you're going to work. You've got your shirtsleeves on and all."

My twitchy fingers ache to punch that fake bafflement off his face. It's been a minute since Roman and I engaged in actual fisticuffs, so my vehemence surprises me. If I recall correctly, the last time was during my winter break from college, when I came home and discovered he'd been making liberal use of my bedroom — specifically my collection of EDM vinyl, custom shoes and gaming computer — in my absence. As I also recall, I roughed him up pretty good the time before that, when he scratched my car. I caught hell from Mom and Dad after, but it was entirely worth it. Maybe this asshole needs a reminder of what I can still do in terms of black eyes and bloody noses.

"Not to worry. I just have a conference call in a few minutes." I stare him down, silently begging him to say one more fucking word. "So I'm available for horse introductions."

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Roman, to his credit, represses his responsive smirk and keeps his mouth shut, but Tamsyn swings into gear.

“No worries,” she says pleasantly, her flinty gaze hitting me hard. “I’ll keep myself busy. Maybe I can get Maddie to show me the horses when she has a break. So you can just ignore me. Pretend I’m not here.”

Ignore the thing in the world that matters most to me. Funny. Now she’s got jokes.

The two of us face off in a seething silence for a beat or two. Her open defiance kicks off a wave of teeth grinding and jaw flexing that I can’t quite stop. Everything about the situation with her is an open wound. The fact that it’s all my own doing only makes it worse. And the proximity with no touching makes me want to rip my skin off. Once upon a time, the electricity between us was hot and positive. Now it’s hostile and negative. Imagine my surprise to realize that it doesn’t matter much. It’s still electricity and it still crackles. Which means we can’t go on like this. Bottom line. I need to apologize and beg for her forgiveness. I need to stop waiting for her to be ready to talk, stop giving her space and just plow ahead?—

“Tamsyn’s had a busy morning,” Roman interjects, snapping me out of it my half-formed strategies. “She’s been on the phone trying to find work so she can go back to the city right away.”

Tamsyn glares at him. I glare ather.

What the fuck is this new dumpster fire? I thought we’d put this one thing behind us, but I guess not. I peel my attention away from her long enough to shoot him a

grateful look. He may be a dick at times, but I appreciate the heads up. He gives me a tiny nod: Don't worry. I got you.

I turn back to Tamsyn. "What's this about, Ms. Scott? I thought everything was settled for now."

She squares her shoulders and hikes up her chin, clearly over my bullshit and ready to launch all her missiles. Allow me to say that this thrills me. I'll take any of her fire that I can get at this point. Any fiery new sides she wants to show me, I'm there.

But an unwelcome interruption materializes from the hallway as Daniel pokes his head in. "Lucien. We've got a situation here you need to handle. A couple of situations."

I barely spare him a glance. All my attention is riveted on Tamsyn. "It's not a good time. What is it?"

"Visitors," Daniel says darkly. "The police again."

The police? Fuck. That's not the type of information I wanted or expected to hear right now. I shoot Tamsyn a pointed look—this is not over— then I set off for the foyer, propelled by my cold fury at this disrespect after I told Detective Smith I wouldn't talk to them again without my lawyer present.

Daniel is hot on my heels. "I need to talk to you about something else first, Lucien."

"Not now," I say, continuing my trajectory until I reach Detective Smith and today's uniformed officers.

Detective Smith, the consummate chess player, already has her pleasantly professional smile in place. "Good morning, Mr. Winter."

I scowl at her, only dimly aware of Daniel, Roman and Tamsyn filing in behind me. It's bad practice to be a hard ass with the police, but I've got the money to not give a fuck. Unless this woman has a warrant, she and her buddies need to get the hell out of my house. "What's going on, Detective? I told you yesterday that I have an attorney. You and I won't be having any further discussions without him present."

"I remember. And I would never dream of trying to talk to you without your lawyer. But your wife's death is still suspicious and my extensive training and experience tell me that she didn't hit herself on the back of the head with a large rock." She turns to Roman. "So I'm here to talk to your brother, Roman, and hopefully rule him out. I assume this is him?"

"It is," Roman says with his usual smoothness, stepping forward to shake her hand.

"Detective Smith. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your whereabouts the night Ravenna died?"

I shoot Roman a warning look, but he's already talking.

"Not at all. I was in Philadelphia overnight. Business meeting. You can talk to my office. They'll put you in touch with the company pilot. You can see the flight records if you want."

"Perfect," Detective Smith says, sending me a look of veiled triumph. "I'll do that."

"Great," I say, stepping forward and gesturing her toward the door. "Now, if there's nothing else?"

"Actually, there is," she says, now making my heart drop by turning to Tamsyn. "Ms. Scott," she says, extending her hand. "Nice to see you again."

“And you,” Tamsyn says, looking startled as she shakes.

“I was wondering if you might come down to the police station and answer a few questions for me about your whereabouts the other —”

A surge of ice through my veins along with some primitive instinct probably buried deep in my brain stem propels me to step sideways, blocking Tamsyn from this woman’s line of sight. The thing we are not going to do — the thing no one willeverdo in my presence — is implicate Tamsyn Scott in any sort of legal wrongdoing or jeopardy. “I was very clear yesterday, Detective Smith. Tamsyn had nothing to do with Ravenna’s death.”

“Lucien...” Tamsyn tries.

“I’d like to hear that from Ms. Scott herself, if you don’t mind,” Detective Smith says, unruffled.

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“Ms. Smith is already represented by counsel,” I say, praying she doesn’t ask me the counsel’s name because I don’t have it yet. “So you need to —”

“It’s okay, Lucien,” Tamsyn says, stepping out in front of me and facing Detective Smith with no idea of the legal jeopardy she could keep putting herself into. I know I did the same idiotic thing yesterday, but this is Tamsyn and I am not fucking around with her freedom. I’ve seen enough crime shows and movies to know how the police can twist things when push comes to shove. “I was?—”

“Ms. Scott. Stop speaking,” I bark.

“—back in the city with Lucinda Hooper, my former employer,” Tamsyn says. I make a sound of utter disbelief that she doesn’t bother to acknowledge. “She can vouch for me.”

Detective Smith tips her head at one of the uniforms, who whips out a notebook and writes that down. “Lucinda Hooper? At her Park Avenue townhouse?”

“That’s right,” Tamsyn says.

Detective Smith sends a flash of triumph in my direction. “See how easy that was, Mr. Winter?”

“Glad I could help,” I say, crossing to the door and swinging it open for them. “Now, if there’s nothing else?”

She doesn’t move. “Actually, there is,” she says, her smile fading. She reaches into

her breast pocket and pulls out a sealed envelope, which she hands to me. “A warrant. For your security tapes. As requested.”

“Great,” I say, doing my best to hide my shock that she got it so quickly. It’s my own fault. I knew better than to underestimate her. “Let me just call my lawyer. I’ve already asked my security tech guy Ted Winwood to pull them for you.”

“Actually, Lucien, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Daniel says, stepping forward, pulling me to the side and dropping his voice. “The other situation I mentioned.”

“What?” I say. I’ve got enough situations to last the rest of my life at this point. The last thing I need is another one. “Spit it out.”

Daniel looks grim. “Winwood is gone. And we think he took the hard drive with the security tapes on it with him.”

9

Tamsyn

My phone rings with Lucien’s special ring tone later that afternoon, when I’m alone in my bedroom, lying on my bed with a Julia Quinn historical romance I can’t force myself to read and bored out of my mind. I’ve developed the nasty habit of superimposing Lucien’s face onto the face of whatever Bridgerton hero I’m currently reading about and wishing Ms. Quinn would swoop in and solve my romantic problems in a few hundred pages. God knows I need some kind of expert to help me sort through what my heart wants and all the warnings my head screams at me.

Anyway, I can’t snatch the phone up quickly enough, as thrilled as I am dismayed to hear from Lucien. My plan is for us to avoid and ignore each other. And I mean to. I

absolutely would let the call go to voice mail. Or, better yet, block him altogether. If only I weren't so curious about any update on Winwood's disappearance. Knowing Lucien, he's probably already hired a team of investigators with bloodhounds to find him.

"Meet me out front," Lucien says, his voice a low rumble in my ear when I answer.

"I don't think that's a good—" I say, my heart already thumping into overdrive.

"Now," he says, and hangs up.

An internal struggle follows. Let's call it brief. Let's agree that my innate nosiness and overwhelming desire to see Lucien again quickly override my hatred of barked commands and make it impossible for me to do anything other than throw my sneakers back on and head downstairs. Am I proud of these moral failings? No. But I want the record to reflect that I do force him to wait a full three minutes before I walk downstairs at an unhurried pace. So I put those tiny triumphs firmly in my column. But when I get outside, I don't hear him at first. Until I hear the crunch of gravel behind me and look around to discover —

"Oh, my God," I say, the breath whooshing out of my voice on a wave of youthful fantasies run wild.

Lucien sits astride a towering horse. Man and beast are so tall that I find myself craning my neck to take them both in. As always when he's around, my attention is drawn first to Lucien. He never disappoints. He's changed into stretchy tan riding pants, the kind that are a loving caress to his thigh muscles and his impressive bulge in front. Everything is on beautifully masculine display. Forget gray sweatpants, ladies. If you want to see what your man has going on below the waist, these riding pants are the way to go. He's also wearing gleaming black riding boots and a white polo shirt that showcases the broad stretch of his shoulders and rippling muscles in

his arms. For added intrigue, his aviator shades are firmly in place. He's even holding one of those little whippy things — acrop, I think it's called. People also use these as sex toys. I flash back to an episode of *Sex and the City* where Samantha gave Carrie her crop to use on Big. That leads to an immediate flash of wondering what Lucien would do with the crop if I let him, but I immediately yank my naughty thoughts away from that image.

Focus on the horse, Tam.

My gaze switches to the other ridiculously masculine beast on display. I almost swoon. He's dark brown but not quite black, with a forehead star and the kind of chocolate eyes with lush lashes that make kids all over the world fall in love the second they see a horse. I croon with appreciation, my instant adoration for him tempered only by my sudden increased hate for Lucien for putting me in this position. He truly is a master manipulator. He knows that while I may curse the ground he walks on, there's no way I can walk away from this.

Taking full advantage of the wind blowing in his favor, he slides down from the saddle in one fluid movement that showcases him as the athlete he is. Then he stands there holding the reins of this giant creature as though it's the most natural thing in the world to him. He's truly breathtaking. And that's before he hits me with all his focused attention. To his credit, though, he keeps any sign of triumph to a minimum, which I appreciate.

“I wanted you to meet a horse. Since it's so important to you.”

My excitement is such that I'm not sure how I'm keeping the balls of my feet on the ground, much less the blossoming delight off my face. “What should I do?” I say, not wanting to do anything wrong and make the horse hate me for life.

“Come around to the left.” Lucien's voice is a seduction in itself, darkly authoritative

for both me and the horse. “Good girl. Now give him a second to get your scent.”

I go still and wait as I eat up this praise, but the horse has evidently been through this drill before and knows what to do. He gives me a big snuffling whiff, then nudges my arm.

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A friendship offer if ever I've seen one. I'm only sorry I don't have a beaded bracelet to present him as a gift.

Naturally, I melt. "Oh, my God. I love him," I say, abandoning my efforts to be hostile to Lucien no matter what and letting the smile come.

Lucien grins in response. "Looks mutual. This is Orion. Orion, meet Ms. Scott."

I edge closer, reaching for the velvety muzzle and giving Orion a little rub. He edges closer, whereupon I lose my head and press my face to his, inhaling his scent. Musky earth. Hay. Grass. Leather. Heaven.

When I open my eyes again, it's to discover Lucien reaching into his breast pocket and producing several baby carrots. "Want to give him a snack?"

"Yes!"

I hold out my hand. Lucien opens it flat and places the carrots on my palm. Orion, it turns out, does not require an invitation. There's a startling flash of giant white teeth, although I'm not worried because Lucien maintains his firm grip on the reins. Then there's a bit of wetness, a snuffle, a series of loud crunches and the carrots are gone.

I've never been more thrilled by anything in my entire life. I smile at Lucien, my gratitude probably shining through every pore I possess. He's very still as he stares back at me, those reflective sunglasses no barrier to the intensity I feel burning me from the other side of the lenses. His plan to make it impossible for me to keep hating him is a brilliant success.

Which means it's time for me to go.

So I douse my smile and give Orion a final pat before backing up a step. "Thanks for letting me meet him. I'd better get back." I say it as though I have some prior commitment. And maybe I do. God knows I wouldn't want to miss the shadows shifting across my bedroom walls or any of the dust moats floating by.

"You don't want to go for a ride?"

I freeze, immediately trapped by all the temptation in that silky voice. This is no horse ride. This is a seduction. If he wanted me to go riding with him, why would he bring only one horse? He probably has a thousand horses in his barn, wherever it is. If I get on this horse with him, we'll have to be in close physical contact the whole time. Unless he plans to let me ride while he leads, which I seriously doubt. I don't know everything about Lucien, but I know that much. So this is a bad idea. The worst. On the other hand, I waited twenty-two years for the opportunity to ride a horse. Letting this one slide seems like a bad move.

Lucien stands there watching me struggle through it all, his expression unreadable.

"He's big, but is he big enough for two people?" I finally say, deciding to focus on the potential danger to the horse rather than that to my equilibrium.

"Don't worry. We won't go far."

So there's my choice. I can hurry back upstairs to re-coop myself up in my room or I can ride this horse with Lucien. As always when it comes to Lucien, I make the wrong choice.

I nod.

Lucien swings into motion, surging up into the saddle before I can change my mind. Then he reaches for me. “Put your foot in the stirrup,” he says, taking a firm grip of my hand. “The other one. There you go. Now swing your other leg over.”

I mimic his motion, and the next thing I know I’m up in the saddle behind him. Which is, just so you know, way higher than it looks from the ground. Impossibly high.

“Scoot back a bit,” Lucien says over his shoulder. “You ready?”

No, I’m not ready. The saddle isn’t exactly made for two butts. So that’s one thing. Another is that my dress’s skirt is now hiked up and my bare thighs are pressed against the back of his thighs. There’s nowhere else for them to go. I’ve got my arms looped around his waist. Again — no other place for them, nothing else for them to hang onto. He’s so strong and warm. So unyieldingly masculine. The response from my female bits is immediate and overwhelming. Instant blood flow to my nipples and clit, generating instant arousal. The driving desire to press my face to the strong column of his neck, stroke his thighs and delve between his legs to see what kind of response I can get out of his big dick. It’s hard to say which one is more dizzying—my carnal need for him or the effort it takes to hold myself back from doing the things that have become second nature to me. It’s the worst kind of exquisite torture. But of course, this was his plan all along and we both knew it. But there’s no time for regrets. No time to remind myself what an idiot I am when it comes to him. So I take a deep breath and lie my ass off.

“I’m ready.”

He clicks his tongue, Orion responds immediately and we’re off.

Every bit of it is fantastic. The breeze through my hair. Clinging tightly to Lucien’s trim waist and pressing my body against his broad back as he absorbs the horse’s

flow. The rhythmic motion of our thighs rising and falling with Orion's movements. The horse's restrained power and fluidity. The unmistakable eroticism of the saddle thrusting against the sweet spot between my legs. It all goes straight to my head, making me giddy with laughter and excitement.

If I've ever been alive before this moment, I'm not sure I remember.

I don't know how long we ride, heading across fields to a grove of trees inside Ackerley's fenced perimeter. Five minutes. Maybe ten. He takes the horse through some paces, faster sometimes and slower others. I'm not sure if we're galloping or cantering, and it doesn't matter. It all feels fast to me. Joyous. Unspeakably arousing. But then, way too soon, Lucien slows the horse and we stop beneath a giant weeping willow tree whose sheltering branches have room for us and Orion.

Lucien slides down, then reaches up to help me down. And don't think I fail to notice our closeness or the slow slide of my body against his on my way to the ground. Luckily, a brief reprieve comes when he turns to tie Orion's reins to one of the lower branches. Orion immediately dips his head and starts munching grass. Much as I'd like to watch him all day and avoid unfolding events, Lucien has already taken off his sunglasses, tucked them into his shirt pocket and hit me with the full weight of his attention. I'm not ready. Especially since there are no distractions out here. No hustle and bustle from the staff or the possibility of Roman or Daniel coming around the corner to rescue me from my own spiraling feelings.

Just me and Lucien and the seething mass of unsaid words and feelings between us.

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“We need to come to an understanding.” The new huskiness in Lucien’s voice doesn’t help. “You and I.”

I watch him warily. “Okay...?”

“You’re here. You’re staying here until the police are satisfied that none of us had anything to do with Ravenna’s death. Then we can figure out what’s next.”

I open my mouth because his directives are getting to be a bit much this afternoon, but he never gives me a chance.

“Don’t talk to the police without them going through me and your attorney first. Understood?”

I don’t speak for a couple of beats. His brows go up.

“I’m allowed to talk now?” I say.

His jaw tightens. “By all means.”

“I don’t have money for an attorney. And why do I need one anyway when I can quickly explain that I have an alibi?”

“I thought you understood,” he says, his expression growing steadily darker. “I’m getting an attorney for you.”

“I thought you understood,” I say, scoffing. “I don’t want anything from you.”

His speculative gaze skates over me, light as a feather. “Nothing?”

I could smack him for doing this to me — heating me up and making me sizzle inside even though I know he’s poison. I could kill him for doing this to me. “Nothing.”

Unfortunately, my most targeted death stare produces only an unconvinced shrug from him. “Let’s circle back to that. We’ll get everything else figured out when the time comes. For now, all you need to know is that I’m going to do anything I need to do to protect you. Whatever it takes.”

I’d really planned to hang onto my cool cucumber routine for as long as possible, but if he wants to go there, I’m willing to get into it. Anything is better than surrendering to the unwanted but overwhelming feminine thrill of seeing how vehement this powerful man is about taking care of my safety. “Like hire security to follow me without my knowledge, you mean?” I say, my voice hardening to a sword’s edge.

A gleam of satisfaction from him. “Exactly like that. And you were glad they were there when the paps swarmed you. Don’t deny it.”

“I was glad they were there, but it would be nice to know what major events are swirling around my life ahead of time every now and then. Sadly, that doesn’t seem to be how things work with you.”

His expression falls. “Tamsyn...”

“Anything else?” I reach for Orion’s reins, so over this whole conversation and desperate to be anywhere else than with him. It’s almost better to be cooped up in my room wishing for him rather than confronted with him. I don’t know what to do with all these churning emotions. I’m like a time bomb inside. “While you’re issuing directives?”

I think it's a pretty good parting line. I turn my back on him and start to put my foot in the stirrup to see if I can climb up by myself. But he swoops in, hefting me up. The next thing I know, I'm settled sideways on the saddle. With my skirt hiked up higher than it needs to be and his hands — big, hard, hot hands — resting on my bare thighs. Orion shifts beneath me but now is not the time for that horse. Lucien stares up at me. I stare down at him, riveted, my breath hissing. The dappled sun through the leaves hits his eyes just right, making them blaze.

“Yeah, there's something else.” He steps closer, locking me in his gaze as he runs his nose along my sensitive inner thigh. My entire body erupts with delicious goose flesh. “I'm sorry. Please forgive me.”

It takes everything I have to work up a scoffing sound at these words I've desperately wanted to hear. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I want you back.”

I gasp, my heart lurching. Oh, God. Oh, God.

And what do I do when confronted with this unholy temptation? The smart thing, which is to hop down and run back to the house and barricade myself in my room for the duration? No, ma'am. Not I. I put my hands on his head and pull him in hard as I widen my legs for him, savoring his growl of pleasure.

I don't know how we manage this precarious balancing act. I don't know how Lucien manages to steady the shimmying horse with one hand while also nudging my panties aside with the other, but he does everything with his usual expertise. I know I'm safe. Physically safe, anyway. He zeros in, finding my spot with ridiculous ease and nuzzling and lapping me up until there's nothing left but my unabashed cries and blind pleasure. I give him everything. There's no way I can hold it back. It's all too close to the surface and I've missed him far too much. I arch into his mouth, the

spasming pleasure washing so easily over me after all the stimulation of gripping a horse between my thighs. It's such a thrill to have his hands on me again. Such a blessed relief. Such a miracle that I don't tumble off that horse and melt into the earth beneath Lucien's booted feet.

It's the longest, brightest, hottest orgasm of my life. The only problem is that no matter how long I ride that endless crest of ecstasy, I can't get far enough to outrun the shame that's right on its heels. The last few ripples and pulses are still working their way through my body when I tighten my fingers in his hair and yank him away from me as hard as I just pulled him closer. I slam my legs shut against him. I swing my leg over the saddle, pretending I don't feel the sweetly lingering ache in my clit the same way I don't see my juices smeared across his lush lips, the turbulence in his eyes or the massive erection still tenting the front of those sexy riding pants.

So he's suffering from blue balls? His dick is uncomfortable and unsatisfied while my pussy feels like its covered in glittering butterflies? Good. It's exactly what he deserves. Let all his lower hardware shrivel up, fall off and die for all I care.

Let him atone.

"Let's go back," I say, keeping my gaze resolutely straight ahead as I scoot back to make room for him.

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But he surprises me by swinging into the saddle behind me once he unties Orion's reins, putting them in my hands and making sure I've got the grip right. And you know what? I take them. "You're in charge," he says quietly.

"Good." I sit up straighter. I hold my hand out and demand more. "I need the crop, don't I?"

He spins it around and plants it in my hand without a word, allowing both of us to pretend I know what the hell I'm supposed to do with the thing.

Then he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me back against the solid expanse of his torso, and it's kind of fun to pretend it's comfortable and emotionally safe there even though I know it's not. He makes his horse noise and clicks his heels and we're off again, Orion steered more by his natural instincts and the secret cues that Lucien gives him behind me than any newfound equestrian skills from me. I stiffen my posture, trying to move with the horse rather than with Lucien. I strain away from Lucien and his rigid erection as best I can, but my body is weak and we both proved it back there under that willow tree. Worse, he doesn't make it easy for me, running his hands up and down my flexing thighs, nuzzling the sweet spot where my neck meets my shoulder and helping himself to my breasts and my belly and all of me he can reach.

And I don't stop him. I hate him, but I don't stop him.

"You're in charge," he says again, his voice just loud enough for me to hear over the rush of wind in my ears. "But I want you back."

That's when I feel it. A healthy dose of unease. Because he sounds like he means it. And my will has never stood a chance when it's up against this will. Especially when he's offering me something I want or need. God knows I want his groveling apology for the way he ripped my heart out. I need to hear his explanation for what he did. I want him to give me a graceful way off this playing field so I don't have to try to hate him forever. But—what then? I forgive him and we resume our lives with me praying he never does it again? The thought makes me shudder. No. It's not happening. I don't trust my judgment where he's concerned. Nor do I trust myself not to burst into ugly sobbing if we go much further down this path. "This is sex. Everyone knows that sex doesn't have to mean a thing. Don't make it more than it is."

"Lie to yourself if you want to," he says, his lips brushing my ear. "You can't lie to me."

My heart sinks until it feels as though it's resting hard in the pit of my stomach and I pull away from him. He withdraws his hands and we ride the rest of the way in silence, thank goodness. When we reach the house, Lucien starts to guide Orion to the path in front of the front door to drop me off where he picked me up, but I tighten my grip on the reins and steer him over to the garage, stopping in front of the keypad. Then I swing down by myself and stare up at Lucien with all the icy defiance inside of me. Which is a lot.

"What's the code?" I say.

He tells me.

I punch it in, standing back when the door swings up. Then I walk inside, making a show surveying all his precious luxury cars. By the time I swing my attention back around to him, he's swung down from the horse and is watching me closely.

"Something you need, Mrs. Scott?"

“I’m taking the Range Rover into the city for the day tomorrow.” I don’t mention where I think I’m going to go with his fancy car — I have no fucking idea, to be honest — but that’s not the point, and we both know it. “By myself.”

There’s a pause during which I’m sure he battles his protective demons. “As long as you come back.”

I nod, satisfied, and start to walk off. But he calls after me.

“I’m also going into the city tomorrow. To the office. You could stop by. See it.”

I freeze. This is one of the most insidious things about Lucien. The thing that most gets under my skin. He never lets me have a win. He dangles these endless temptations in front of me (I’m dying to see his office; of course I am) and uses my own obsession with him against me.

I don’t know if I’ll ever be free of him. But I need to keep trying even if I can’t force myself to give him an outright no this one. Or anything else, evidently.

“We’ll see,” I say, continuing my way.

He lets me go for once. After a beat or two, I hear the creak of the saddle as he mounts Orion again followed by Orion’s swift hooves as he sets off. But even this tiny getaway is ruined when I slip into the cool confines of the house and immediately run into Roman, whose swift shocked gaze runs over me and reveals that he sees me as exactly what I am. A woman with high color, erect nipples and a dress with a skirt that’s been wrinkled beyond all recognition. A woman who’s been fucked to within an inch of her life despite having been brutally dumped a few days ago. And it’s not that I care about Roman’s moral judgments as I scurry up to my bedroom with my head down. He’s a man who has sex with women he pays for the pleasure. Fuck him.

It's just that I can't stand for anyone else to see me in this dark moment when I hate the weakness in myself a million times worse than I could ever hate Lucien.

11

Lucien

"Lucien? Are you with me?"

I glance around at my lawyer, startled and frankly annoyed by the sound of his voice interrupting my thoughts of yesterday's horseback riding interlude. I'm not with him. Although my body and brain are present and accounted for as we speed along Madison Avenue in the back of my chauffeured car, my thoughts are filled with images of Tamsyn and her cries of ecstasy as I went down on her. On the slickly delicious taste of her—fresh oysters and aroused woman. On the thrilling revelation that she's not quite as immune to me as she'd like to be.

Oh, yes. Despite everything, I got some good news yesterday, didn't I?

Still, it's unreasonable of me to expect the rest of the world to go fuck itself while I wallow in precious memories. Niceties must be observed. "I'm with you."

"Good," Gray says. "Like I said, police investigations can take a while. Especially now that Winwood did you the favor of taking off with the security tapes and making himself the focus of interest. Now the immediate heat is off you. But we can't get complacent."

"Right," I say.

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“We should expect the police to find him soon.”

That gets my attention. “I wouldn’t count on that. I thought I mentioned: Winwood is former special forces. He’s the kind of guy who’s always one step ahead and doesn’t make mistakes. That’s why I hired him in the first place.”

Gray’s expression sours.

“But I did bring my investigator in to see if he can find him. He’s former CIA.”

“Nice,” Gray says.

My attention immediately reverts to the flow of passersby on the sidewalk. Then tiptoes straight back to Tamsyn and her introduction to Orion. Her face is burned across my thoughts and I can’t say I even mind. It’s a beautiful kind of torture to remember how thrilled she was. The way those brown eyes sparkled and shone, even though they didn’t shine at me. You think I give a fuck that all her happiness and excitement in my presence was geared toward my horse? I don’t. I’m too far beyond any considerations about pride or ego. I just needed to be alone with her for a little while. Getting to touch her while riding the horse was an inspired idea if I say so myself. Getting to mouth bang her and gorge on the juices from her gushing pussy was an undeserved slice of heaven.

But I’ll gratefully accept it.

Not that I’m satisfied, mind you. I shift uncomfortably, my balls still blue and neglected. But it’s fine. I can be patient. I will be patient.

“I wish I knew exactly what the police were doing to track him down,” Gray says, shaking his head as he stares at his own window. “They’ve been too quiet for the last twenty-four hours. I prefer to keep Detective Smith where I can see her.”

“Agreed,” I say. The police have been silent, but it’s the heavy silence you get before storm, the kind where electrical impulses seem to thread the breeze and the air can’t quite support the weight of whatever’s about to fall from the sky onto your head. I don’t know who Detective Smith is looking at today (Winwood? Me?) or what she hopes to find. I just know she’s looking. And I know that Detective Smith is exactly the kind of bloodhound you don’t want sniffing on your tail.

Everything in my gut tells me this case will shake loose sooner rather than later. Which means my time to work things out with Tamsyn and possibly even my freedom is running out. So this brief reprieve is my time to plan. Hence, this little day trip to the upper East side. I need to do a bit more planning. Move a few more pieces into place. And if I can come out of this nightmare unscathed...

My simmering fear won’t allow me to get much further than that. It’s there all the time now, leaving precious little room for anything other than Tamsyn’s eyes overlaid on top of everything and my nonstop yearning for her.

I ruined everything between us. But if I can stay free for a little longer and spend more time with her, I can get her back. I know it. She doesn’t want to hate me. I just need to give her a graceful way off that playing field. And with Ravenna truly dead and gone now? And nothing blocking my path to the life I want with Tamsyn? No outside forces lingering in the shadows and waiting to pounce on our relationship? The sky is the limit. Not only am I going to get Tamsyn back, before it’s all over, she’s going to love me no matter who I am or what terrible things I’ve done.

Which is exactly the way I love her.

Nothing less than all her body and all her soul will satisfy me. Don't get me wrong, I've got the use of her body for now, and it's a damn fine consolation prize. So I'll take it. And I'll take it as often and as enthusiastically as she lets me. But I want it all— her smiles and laughter. Her arches, coos and cries in the night. Her vows and future. Her children. Hereverything.

I plan to succeed. But I also have a contingency in place in case my time runs out.

“What about what I mentioned earlier?” I say, snapping back into focus and startling Gray with my sudden vehemence. “Is that in the works?”

“The estate planning stuff?”

“Yes,” I say impatiently. “I want the trust set up. Right away.”

He holds up a hand. “I'm trying to keep up with you here, Lucien. And I've already given the estate planning department the brief of what you want since I only do criminal work?—”

“Good.”

“—but no one understands what you're trying to —”

“You don't need to understand.” My tension spikes and I find myself clenching my fists. I force myself to open my hands and rest them on my knees. Now is not the time for me to unravel or lose my temper. “You just need to do what I want.”

“We've got enough to focus on with the police investigation. Plus, your PR people have lost their fucking minds because you're with me right now. They've texted me at least six times since we got in the car. They want you to go into the office to work on your response to whatever the police cook up, which is what I thought we were

doing. Where are we even going?”

“Right here,” I say as the car glides to a stop by the curb in front of a lovely little brownstone. “Wait here. Or drive around the block and get some coffee. I don’t give a fuck. But I need a few minutes. We’ll go to the office after that.”

With that, I grab the flowers on the seat next to me, hop out, shut the door in his startled face and trot up the stone steps before he can register a protest behind me. No sign of the paparazzi today, thank God. My security guy, Hank, who’s still on the job looking out for Tamsyn when she’s away from Ackerley, informed me that the press was gone for now. Probably because I arranged for an anonymous “tipster” to alert one of the photogs that Tamsyn had moved to one of the warehouse-cum-lofts in Brooklyn. That should keep them off our trail for a bit. I glance around for Hank—there he is down the street at a discreet distance. I nod at him. He nods back. Then I hit the buzzer, determined to cross a few more things off my to-do list.

I hear a small dog barking inside, then quick footsteps on the other side of the heavy beveled glass door. I hitch my poker face firmly over my ears.

Then the door swings open and there’s Tamsyn, her expression quickly cycling through surprise and unwilling pleasure before finally settling on narrow eyed annoyance as she looks me up and down, registering the flowers. “I was expecting the pizza delivery.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” I say, but my lack of genuine repentance doesn’t seem to do me any favors.

“Lucien,” she says, dropping her voice to a scandalized stage whisper as she shoots a glance over her shoulder toward what I assume is the kitchen. “What the hell are you doing here? I told you I wanted to spend the day —”

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“Don’t worry. I’m not here to see you.” I put some extra volume into my voice as I brush past her and make a show of checking out the stately staircase. It works. Mrs. Hooper’s head immediately appears around the curved archway at the other end of the foyer, her face registering shock, then delight. Even her little dog, Juniper, seems thrilled to see me. He zooms out, dancing around my feet. Guess he remembers me from the cruise. I settle the flower bouquet under my arm, scoop him into a football hold with my free hand and scratch his chest. I try not to radiate too much triumph in Tamsyn’s direction, but it is fun to see the bright color rush to her face and know that she’s as happy to see me as everyone else is, even if she’s too stubborn to admit it. “Good to see you, Mrs. Hooper.”

“Lucien Winter?” cries Mrs. Hooper, hurrying out and reaching for me with both hands. She’s wearing one of her floral dresses. She’s also wearing fuzzy blue slippers, which she shoots an apologetic glance at as she takes my hands and returns my double-cheeked kiss. “What a wonderful surprise to see you in my humble abode. I didn’t know you were coming or I would’ve put on my real shoes. And I’m not wearing any lipstick. Tamsyn, honey, why didn’t you tell me Lucien was coming?”

“Because I didn’t know,” Tamsyn says tartly with a final sweeping glance around to make sure there are no paparazzi outside before she snaps the door shut.

“Oh, I just look terrible,” Mrs. Hooper continues, now primping her silver hair in the console mirror. “Come in, Lucien, come in.” She waves me into the living room, a light and airy space with good lines. Although I’m not a fan of the cowhide rug and full-sized longhorn skull over the mantel. “Can we get you something to drink? And don’t forget to call me Lucinda.”

“Don’t fuss. I apologize for my appearance,” I say, setting the dog down and gesturing at my baseball cap and runner’s clothes. I haven’t been running for once, but this is hardly what I usually wear for a day in the office. “I’m trying to be incognito.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Hooper says with sudden hushed solemnity. “You’ve had some troubles since the last time I saw you, haven’t you?” She shoots an apologetic glance at Tamsyn. “I was so happy to hear about Ravenna’s reappearance. For your sake, I mean, Lucien. And then so sad to hear that, she, ah...”

“I appreciate that,” I say, eager to shut this down before she gives herself an injury trying to think of what to say in this impossible situation.

“And if there’s anything I can ever do for you, Lucien,” she continues. “You’re such a dear friend —”

“Actually, there is something you can do for me. I understand you’re moving to Palm Beach? So the brownstone is on the market?”

Mrs. Hooper gasps, her jaw dropping, but I’m not concerned about her reaction. A subtle glance at Tamsyn shows me that she shares the older woman’s surprise. “Why, yes.”

“These are for you, by the way.” I pass her the flowers, a giant bouquet of all the bright blue hydrangeas I could find on the way over here. “I was sorry to hear that you had a health episode at the end of the cruise. And glad to hear you’re doing better now.”

“Oh, these are beautiful,” she says with a tinkling laugh. “I love hydrangeas. Tam, run and put these in water for me. Grab the big crystal vase. Be quick about it.”

I realize that old habits die hard, but some old habits need to die. I'm looking at one of them as Tamsyn automatically hurries forward to do her former employer's bidding and the woman thrusts the flowers at her with all the carefree entitlement of Cinderella's wicked stepmother. I know this isn't my house. I also know that the relationship dynamic between Tamsyn and Mrs. Hooper began long before I arrived on the scene. But the thing I know most of all is that Tamsyn is no longer at this woman's mercy and I refuse to stand by while she's treated otherwise.

"I'm happy to help you find a vase for those," I tell Mrs. Hooper, infusing a slight chill in my tone. "Tamsyn is a guest in your home now. Not an employee. Don't put her to any trouble."

Both women gape at me.

"As I was saying, I'm always looking for opportunities to expand my real estate portfolio." I make a show of looking around the room and up at the ceiling. "Are those the original crown moldings?"

Lucinda peels her lower jaw off her hardwood floors with some difficulty. "Y-yes. I had everything repainted two years ago after I remodeled the kitchen. The furnace is only five years old. The water heater is a bit older. I'm in the process of having everything staged and freshened so I can put it on the market at the end of the month. I'm happy to have my agent send you more information —"

"No need." I'd wandered over to the fireplace to admire the decorative inlay. "I'll have my real estate agent get in touch by the end of the day. I'd like to make an offer. Unless you're in love with the idea of formally listing the place and going through that whole process...?"

Mrs. Hooper's response takes a lot longer to arrive this time. She can't seem to get her mouth working at all. "Not at all," she finally says. "I'm happy to entertain any

and all offers.”

I silently hand it to the old gal. She’s got a nice poker face of her own. She knows not to make things too easy for me, and I’m sure she’ll negotiate a decent price for herself, but this is a done deal and we both know it. “I assume a cash offer is acceptable?”

She extends her hand to me and shakes with a firm grip, laughing. “I make it my business to warmly receive all cash offers.”

“Good,” I say as the two of us grin at each other and I take a quick glance at Tamsyn.

Her wide-eyed astonishment does not disappoint.

Much as I’d like to study it a bit more, a sudden unexpected wave of affection toward Mrs. Hooper hits me as I release her hand. I think about what would’ve happened to Tamsyn if the woman hadn’t hired her...If she hadn’t brought Tamsyn along on her Mediterranean cruise...If she hadn’t allowed Tamsyn to stay here after I dumped her the other day...

If Tamsyn and I had never met in the departures lane at LaGuardia.

Where would Tamsyn be now? Where would I?

Fuck.

I’m not a sentimental guy, but some things can’t be ignored. Your life can turn on a dime and it can depend on events entirely outside of your control. If the police wrap up their investigation into Ravenna’s death and come to all the wrong conclusions...who will Tamsyn have then? I know she’s a strong and self-supporting young woman, but who will look out for her? The possibility of that scenario makes

my gut cramp.

“I want to mention...” I sound way too gruff all the sudden, so I pause to clear my throat. “I’m a newcomer on the scene. But I’m grateful for your presence in Tamsyn’s life.” I stare Mrs. Hooper in the face, take her hand again and squeeze it between both of mine. “I’ve got a funeral coming up. And some, ah, uncertainty in my life right now. I expect it to be cleared up soon, but it might not be.”

“God forbid,” Mrs. Hooper mutters.

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“Just so you understand: I know you’d do it anyway because you love her, but I consider it a personal favor to me that you take good care of Tamsyn. And if there’s anything you ever need, Lucinda, come to me. It would be my honor to be there for you.”

I drop her hand and turn away before she can respond, not trusting myself to look her or Tamsyn in the eye now. My feelings are running way too close to the surface, which isn’t like me. Let’s just say I’m not in love with the sensation. I’d invited Tamsyn to come see my office, but I don’t want to test her goodwill any further today by reminding her. On the other hand, no guts, no glory, right? Before I can decide, a new interruption arrives in the form of an urgent knock on the front door.

“That must be the pizza.” Tamsyn ducks her head and hurries off to the foyer. Maybe I’m imagining things, but I think I see her wipe her eyes as she goes. But when she returns, it’s not with the pizza guy. It’s with Gray.

“Sorry for the interruption, Lucien,” he says. “I need to talk to you.”

“It’s not a good time, Gray,” I say. “I told you I’d be right back.”

“This can’t wait.” His expression tightens. “It’s Ravenna.”

One of the women makes a hissing noise, the kind of sound I imagine early citizens of Salem made when the topic of witches came up. As for me, I wince away from the name. Funny how this is her second death and we’re still talking about her as though she’s crouched and ready to spring into any room at any time and unleash new havoc. Knowing Ravenna, she probably is. If there’s a death loophole or a direct portal from

the other side, she'd be the one to exploit it.

“What is it?” I say, noticing, for the first time, how ashen Gray looks.

He opens his mouth to answer, but his voice operates on a lengthy delay. “She gave an interview before she died. It's airing tomorrow night. The network called to get your comment.”

12

Tamsyn

The summons comes after eleven that night, when I'm lying across the bed in my little summer jammies, showered, bored, twiddling the necklace Lucien gave me between my fingers (I've started carrying it in my pocket with me to keep it close; don't ask) and ripe for the picking. As I always am when it comes to Lucien and his demands disguised as pleasant requests. The text pings on my phone along with a single word guaranteed to kick my pulse rate up into the warning zone:

Nightcap?

I forget about what I was ostensibly doing, namely scrolling through news articles about the death investigation and Ravenna's upcoming interview, and toss the phone aside, thinking hard.

I could say no, thanks. Done. Easy. Even easier? I could ignore it. He'd eventually get the message. Not that I expect him to accept the message. But for tonight, he'd get the message and presumably regroup to plot and scheme on getting me back another day.

But the thing is — and this is always the thing — I want to see him. It's been a long

afternoon since I came home from Mrs. Hooper's, where we were abuzz with her sudden reversal of fortune and pending sale of her townhouse. We both wondered why he did it. Maybe he just wanted to add to his portfolio, like he said. Maybe billionaires like him make it a practice to snap up all luxury housing that hits the market. But things with Lucien are never that straightforward. There's always more, always hidden beneath the surface. Did he do it to buy my affections? Does he think a grand gesture toward the only parental figure in my life will get me to forgive him?

Good question. Will it?

I mean...no. Of course it won't. But he keeps stacking up these reasons for me not to hate him. And assuming the role of Mrs. Hooper's fairy godfather just zoomed right to the top.

Anyway, Lucien left abruptly, dashing off to meet with his lawyers and PR people. I didn't ask, and he didn't say, but I got the feeling he wanted to block the interview if possible. He stayed in the city until late, only arriving home about twenty minutes ago. And how do I know that, you might ask? Because I've had my ear to the ground, listening for the sound of his footsteps. Of course I have.

Now this.

My response was always a foregone conclusion. I get up, put the necklace on the nightstand, throw on my little flip-flops and hit the hallway. No sign of Ravenna's scent tonight, thank goodness. Things are weird enough without me fixating on her lingering presence around every corner. Then I head through the darkened house to his study downstairs, dodging the increasingly frantic voice of my self-protective instinct the whole way.

Don't do it, you fucking idiot. You know what will happen.

She's a persistent little bitch. I'll give her that. She works hard to keep me safe. She remembers what happened this afternoon, when a simple horse ride turned into one of the sexiest interludes of my entire life. She knows how susceptible I am to his gleaming eyes, deep voice and skilled mouth and hands. Most of all, she knows how much I hated myself afterwards.

How many ways are you going to let him fuck with you, Tamsyn? You know better. You've got to be smarter than this. Please. Be smarter than this.

I keep going and do my best to ignore her. It's okay this time. True, last time, I let the horse ride get out of hand. But this time, I have a colorable excuse for wanting to see him: to ask him about the interview. I've forbidden myself from asking or showing any interest in his life and circumstances. I'm sticking to that, if nothing else. But he bought Mrs. Hooper's house right in front of me today. He was very gracious with her when he used to find her annoying. I'm allowed to comment on that. There's nothing wrong with me asking him about the interview and commenting on the whole house thing.

Thank him in the morning over breakfast, you dumb bitch. This is a booty call, and everyone knows it.

"Shut up," I tell her under my breath as I turn into the study and — he's not here. The usual lamps are on and it's the same romantic little scene as last night. Just no Lucien. And instead of feeling relief that he's shown mercy, or at least given me a brief reprieve, I feel a crushing disappointment. Until I glance around and see what's waiting in the middle of the coffee table for me this time. My romance books have been replaced with a note card of his heavy ivory stationary propped between the heavy crystal decanter of whiskey and the two fingers he's already poured into a tumbler for me. I pick it up, my attention zeroing in on the single word scrawled in his bold black handwriting:

Sauna

There's even one of his giant and ridiculously fluffy white bath sheets helpfully waiting for me. The kicker? He spritzed his delicious cologne on the card. I caught a faint whiff of it as soon as I picked it up, but now I press it to my nose, breathing deep and saturating my senses with it even as desire curls lower in my belly.

So there I am with another decision point. Not going isn't even an option at this point. My self-protective instincts don't bother trying to warn me against it. I think I hurt her feelings by telling her to shut up. Second decision point— if I'm going, I could go in my undies. I know nothing about sauna etiquette, but I'm pretty sure undies are allowed. Especially here in the United States, where I've learned modesty goes far deeper than it does in Europe. Or I could go nude.

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Like Lucien surely is.

My phone pings again just then, as though he knows I'm standing there frozen and need just the right prod between my shoulder blades to get me moving again.

You coming?

I don't know how he manages to make two words in a text message so silky and inviting. So fatally challenging. So smugly confident. But he does.

And what do I do? Why, I strip off my clothes, of course. All of them. I fold them neatly on the coffee table and wrap myself in that fluffy towel. I down my drink in one rough gulp, savoring the liquid courage as its golden rays slide through me. Then I pour myself a refill and head for the sauna, a little room off his private gym at the back of the house.

It's not until the moment of stepping through the glass door into the steaming heat that I recognize exactly how much sensual danger I'm in. Like I said, I know nothing about saunas, but this seems to be a particularly fine one, fragrant of its cedar planks and the rising scent from Lucien's cologne. There's track lighting along the benches and floor beams, along with sconces dotting the walls overhead. Moisture sizzles in the air the way my blood now sizzles in my veins.

And in the middle of the highest bench, king of all he surveys? Lucien sitting on his white towel, none of which he bothers to drape across his lap. Which means that all his golden skin, dripping with sweat already, is available for me to see. And I notice it all peripherally. The beaded trickle of sweat through the grooves of his pecs and

down the ladder rungs of his abs. A trail I'd love to follow with my tongue. The broad expanse of his shoulders and arms. The flexing muscles of his thighs and calves as he shifts ever so slightly. I even noticed his bare feet and nice toes.

But mostly — and I'm talking about 99.99% of my observational skills — are focused on the dark gleam of triumph in his otherwise impassive face and on the erection, already long, thick and jutting between his legs.

“Ms. Scott,” he says, sipping his own whiskey as he watches me cross to the bench opposite his.

The velvety voice is also a seduction, as irresistible as beaded bracelets to Taylor Swift fans.

“Lucien.”

I stare him in the eye as I sit on the top bench directly across from him, taking all the time in the world about setting my drink beside me and unwrapping my towel. Only when I've had the satisfaction of seeing the rough bob of his Adam's apple and the involuntary twitch of his ruddy length as it reaches for me do I allow myself to lean my head back against the wall, baring my neck and every other part of my body for him to see. Then I reach between my legs and let loose with a little groan as I rub my engorged clit.

His breath comes slowly and ends in a hiss that thrills me. So does the languid way he fists himself in response, stroking up and down, teasing me with glimpses of his entire length and then only the plump plum-like head.

Has he been thinking about me since I left him unsatisfied under that willow tree yesterday? Is he regretting his cruelty toward me? Is it eating away at his gut with jagged little teeth?

If so, good.

My eyes roll closed as I pleasure myself, cooing, but I quickly open them again because I don't want to miss a second of this, my moment of petty triumph. I catch him staring, his glittering eyes locked on my breasts. They ache for him. He can see it, I'm sure. Hard to miss two jutting pink nipples dotting my pale breasts like raspberries on whipped cream. Sighing, I shift just enough to open my thighs and give him a tiny glimpse of what we both know — that I'm glistening and wet. Ready for him. It's old news by now, I suppose, but I earn another hiss from him anyway. I revel in his wretched stillness. It's an emotional cocaine and I'm instantly addicted.

We watch each other for a moment, both heavy lidded and a little breathless with this parallel play. I'm sweating now, the rivulets tracking down my temples, through the groove between my collarbones and down the curves of my belly. The spiking tension demands to be broken one way or the other, but I'm in control—he said so—and I plan to make the most of my power while it lasts. If only I could keep my emotions out of it. So many words crowd onto the tip of my tongue that it's a true effort to choke them back.

How are you doing? Are you okay?

Are your lawyers and PR people taking care of you like they should?

Can you keep yourself out of jail?

Did you kill Ravenna? What have you done to me that I'm not sure the answer matters to me either way?

How did we get here, Lucien?

I can't say any of that. I've forbidden myself to do it. Maybe I suck at keeping him at

physical arm's length, but I'm damn sure going to keep him at emotional arm's length.

He sits there in his own silence, a perfect mirror of all my turbulence.

I eventually remember that Mrs. Hooper is a safe topic. We can talk about her. I can torture him a bit more.

"I've never seen Mrs. Hooper so excited," I say, surprised to hear how husky my voice is.

A rumble of annoyance. "I don't want to talk about Mrs. Hooper right now."

"But I do. I thought you said I was in charge...?"

He doesn't bother answering, but there's a new gleam of respect with his impatientthe floor is yoursgesture.

I manage to control about fifty percent of my triumphant smirk. "You made her very happy."

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“Oh?”

“She’s very grateful.”

Now he looks bored. “She is?”

“You saved her from the trouble and expense of putting her house on the market. It was very kind of you.”

I feel a surge of inner satisfaction as he leans forward, eyes narrowing. Now I’ve got his interest in this conversation, which is exactly why I invoked the K word. And I can’t say I didn’t know what I was doing when I took my sharp little stick and poked the bear. “Did you forget the first rule of dealing with me? I’m not kind.”

“Then why did you do it?” I say, knowing there’s only one answer he can give.

“You know why,” he says, giving it.

I shrug. Scoff. Pause what I’m doing to myself below. “You think I’ll forgive your cruelty because of a real estate transaction?”

Crooked smile from him. “Not at all. But I plan to make it impossible for you to continue hating me at full strength.” He pauses. Absently runs his tongue along his lower lip as his attention drops to my pussy. “Come here, Ms. Scott. Think twice before you sayno. Unless you want me to use this on you.”

He reaches back and picks up something to show me. Oh, God. It’s the riding crop.

You'll be proud of me. I hesitate for a full half a second. Just to make it look good before I stand, climb down from my bench, walk across the way and up to his bench, where he's already dropping the crop and reaching for me, his hands rough. He palms my face, trying to bring me down for his kiss, but I've got to deny him one thing he wants tonight. My pride demands it. So I jerk my head back, turning it away and keeping my lips well out of reach. He scowls, but there's plenty of the rest of me available to kiss and touch and he does. He presses his face to my sweaty neck, tunneling his hands through my damp hair and biting my shoulder's tender curve. He gets a hoarse cry from me in response. He drags his hands down my back and over my ass, thighs, breasts and hips. He wraps me inside the slick strength of his arms, holding me there while I slide against him and scratch my nails up his back hard enough to leave welts.

He makes an incoherent sound and surges to his feet. The next thing I know, he's behind me, bending me over the bench and wedging one of his heavy thighs between mine to widen my stance.

"You want me to take it?" he says, and he sounds raw now. Guttural. He drags his lips down my back and zeros in on my ass, biting a good hunk of one of my cheeks with his sharp teeth. I cry out. In pain. In delight. Then he shifts lower, pressing his face between my two halves, nuzzling there. Licking this virgin part of me and resisting my scandalized efforts to squirm away. My breath turns strangled as exquisite nerve endings I never knew I possessed spring to life and demand more. And that's before he finds the crop again and delivers a stinging smack to both halves of my ass that elicit shrieks of shocked delight from me. "You want me to take it so you can pretend you're not dying for it just like I am, Ms. Scott? But you're dying for this crop just like you're dying for this dick to fill you up, aren't you? You want me to fuck you as long and hard as I can, don't you?" Two more stinging smacks. "Answer me."

"Yes." Who is that sobbing? It's not me, is it? "Yes. You know I do."

“Glad you’re being honest. Good girl.”

He makes a sound. Half growl. Half roar. All victorious. Then he tosses the crop aside, reaches between us, grips himself and thrusts deep inside my slick folds. He’s not gentle, thank God. He fucks me hard, sharp and fast, our wet bodies, slapping together and my breast jiggling in my face as I brace for dear life with my palms on the bench. There’s some hidden spot in me that he knows and finds every time we do it doggy style like this, as unerring as some French pig rooting for truffles. The spiraling pleasure crowds into my most sensitive spot and hovers there for one endless plateau before violently overflowing. I don’t come so much as get consumed by a cataclysm of strangled cries, spasming hips and blinding ecstasy. He’s right there with me, stiffening and shouting my name as he wears himself out and eventually loses his rhythm as the pleasure overtakes him. At some point we sort of collapse together, still joined, with me bracing my hands on the bench and him holding me tight around the waist with his head resting on my back. We’re drenched and breathless. When it’s all over, he pulls out and uses his towel to swiftly wipe me down and dry the wet spot between my legs. I submit to his tender ministrations, wrecked if not ruined, cursing myself for letting him cum inside me when we’re not technically together. I should have denied him that, too, but it never crossed my mind.

We don’t look at each other.

I make the long walk back to my side of the sauna and wrap up in my towel. Then there’s nothing left for me to do other than watch him fold his towel, lay it on his bench and resume his seat. His face is still. Downcast. Unreadable.

I dismally wonder if he plans to sweat himself away into nothing—if I’m hot, sticky and uncomfortable now, he’s got to be dying— but that’s none of my business. I can’t forget that. I need to retreat to the safety of my room. He’s letting me go. He’s giving me that gift. Too bad I’m too foolish to take it.

“The interview.” My voice barely works. “Were you able to stop it?”

It takes him forever to answer. “No.”

I nod, edging closer to the door, but never quite getting there. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” he says, his hard gaze fixed on some indeterminate point on the floor in front of him.

“Lucien...”

“Let’s talk.” His head comes up. I’m in no way prepared for the hopeful vulnerability in his expression. “I need to explain why I did what I did. We need to get through this.”

There it is. No manipulation for once. Just a straight request from him. Exactly what I’ve always asked him for. And God knows we need to address the elephant in the room before it tramples us both. But it’s late and I’m hot and tired. I’m still too hurt and way too angry. And after the way he just fucked me, I know I’m not thinking clearly. I certainly don’t have my defenses in place like I should. Worst of all, my throat and eyes are burning and I’m afraid there’s a volcanic eruption of tears in my near future.

So I dodge and weave again. I’ve gotten pretty good at that lately. “Not tonight.”

“When?”

I open my mouth and the truth zooms out so quickly there’s no time to block it. “When I can trust myself not to sob through the whole conversation. I keep hoping I can hide how wrecked my heart is. So you’ll never know how badly you hurt me.”

He makes a broken sound. His features twist. His chest heaves. “Tamsyn.I’m sorry.”

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“I have to go, Lucien,” I say, rising panic making me shrill as I back toward the door. Because the look on his face makes me think—for the very first time—that he hurt himself as much as he hurt me when he pushed me away. The idea is startling. Revolutionary. And I can’t handle one more thing tonight. “I told you I can’t do this right now. You told me I’m in control. Did you mean that?”

“You know I did.”

“Then don’t make me humiliate myself.” My voice rises and cracks, forcing me to clear my throat. Worse, water trickles down my cheeks and I’m not entirely sure it’s from sweat. “I’m begging you.”

“How long do you plan to punish me?” His voice sounds dull but his gaze is accusatory. “Do you think I don’t know it’s a power ploy, the way you keep putting me off?”

“A power ploy?”

“The kind of thing Ravenna would do, frankly. Jerk me by my chain. Maybe I need to think twice about whether this relationship is good for me.”

Sudden outrage takes over. “Don’t you dare compare me to that psychopath!”

“Do you deny that it feels good to know you’ve got me tied up in knots?”

I hesitate. How can I not? He’s got me dead to rights and I didn’t even realize it until this second. “Can you blame me for being scared to let you get close again? You’ve

taken over my entire life?—”

“You’ve taken over my life!” he roars. “Don’t you see that?”

I’m not sure if I do or not, but I’m not willing to give him the final word here. “I live in your house and eat your food while wearing the shoes you bought me. I let you fuck me on demand even though you ripped my heart out. I need to have some control here. A month ago I didn’t even know you existed. And now you’ve got everything. And I am scared to death. I don’t think I’d even care if I found out you were a murderer.”

“I’m not.”

“But I wouldn’t care if you were! That’s the issue!”

He stares me straight in the face. “I breathe for you, Ms. Scott. You’ve stopped smiling at me. It may not seem like much to you, but it’s enough punishment to last me the rest of my life. So when it comes to control? I hereby declare you the clear winner. Never doubt yourself again.”

Oh, God. Oh, God. He looks like he means it. And all my words are trapped behind my swelling heart and tight throat and I can’t stop these damn tears from falling.

He suddenly turns away, swallowing hard. “We’ll talk when you’re ready. Meanwhile, make sure you come watch the interview tomorrow night with the rest of us. We’ll make it a party.”

“Hey, Tamsyn,” Roman says shortly before nine the following night, when he comes around the corner and sees me standing there alone.

I try to hide a grimace. He’s caught me in the middle of another new personal low. I’m skulking in the hallway outside Lucien’s study, too cowardly to go inside and watch Ravenna’s interview with everyone else and far too nosy to go back upstairs and watch it by myself. I don’t want to get too wrapped up in whatever Ravenna says about him. Because what if — God forbid — my emotions get the best of me and I find myself empathizing with Lucien? On the other hand, why on earth would I want to miss out on seeing his reactions up close and personal? Hence, my dilemma.

Plus, things have been awkward with Roman since he saw me coming in from canoodling on horseback with Lucien the other day. Not that either of us would ever mention that.

Still, I paste a bright smile on my face and do what I think is a reasonably good job of acting like a normal human being. “Roman. Hey.”

“Hey,” he says, playing along. Even though he’s got all one of his brows up at a bemused angle. “Strange day, ha?”

The vibe of the house has been off all day. That’s the only way I can describe it. Too quiet. Too jumpy. The staff whispering in corners and looking worried. Rumors and speculation about where Winwood could be and whether the police are looking for him. Lucien holed up in meetings the whole time. Waiting, waiting, waiting. At least now, finally, something is happening.

“Truer words were never spoken,” I say darkly.

He starts through the door, then pauses when he realizes I’m not right behind him. “You coming?”

All my limited acting skills suddenly decide to fail miserably. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I want to see what Ravenna has got to say.”

He nods with grim agreement. “No one does. But we don’t have a choice. Come on.”

With that, he takes my elbow and ushers me into tonight’s inner sanctum, where Daniel hovers by the bar and Lucien sits in the tufted wing chair opposite the giant TV that’s invisibly built into the bookshelves, but is now playing a car insurance commercial on mute.

Since I haven’t seen Lucien since last night, I’m greedy for details about him. Dark smudges under his eyes hint at his exhaustion. He’s got the top couple of buttons of his dress shirt undone and his shirt sleeves rolled up. He’s got his legs crossed and is moodily staring at the swirling golden contents of his tumbler where he rests his hand over the chair’s arm. But when Roman and I walk in, his head comes up and his flinty gaze immediately locks in on Roman’s hand touching my bare arm. A muscle begins to pulse in his temple hard enough for me to see it across the distance. Worse — and I’m sure this is just my imagination — the spot on my arm begins to burn. And when Lucien’s attention shifts to my face, all my body’s heat concentrates on my cheeks until I’m certain I’m blushing to the roots of my hair.

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He puts his drink down. Uncrosses his legs. Starts to get up?—

Oh, shit. I move away from Roman's grasp under color of finding a seat on the sofa. An effort that is not helped by Lucien's gleam of satisfaction as he resettles in his seat. I hastily turn away, but not before I see what he mouths at me:

Good girl.

Sexual tension swoops low and delicious inside my belly.

"Everyone ready for a good show?" Roman asks, joining me on the sofa, but thankfully at a respectable distance.

Lucien spares his brother a serrated dagger of a look before his attention reverts to me. "Always. Ms. Scott. Wasn't sure you'd join us."

"Neither was I," I say. "Where's your PR? And your lawyer? I thought for sure they'd be here."

Lucien scowls. "I've got enough on my plate. I don't want them here for this. I'll check in with them after."

"Who's up for a Paloma?" calls Daniel, now pouring drinks from his pitcher with a flourish. "It's my signature cocktail. The occasion calls for something special."

"Gallows humor. I like it," I say, gratefully accepting a glass when he comes over and offers it to me. "Thanks."

“My pleasure.” Daniel turns to Roman. “Want one?”

“Why not?” Roman accepts one and raises his glass. What should we toast to?”

“To my late wife, Ravenna.” Lucien raises his glass, his face all grim lines and unforgiving angles. “May this be the very last time she has the last word. And the last time any of us see her face or hear her voice.”

“I’ll take that action,” Roman says, and we all toast.

“Uh-oh. Someone turn the sound up,” I say with a hasty wave at the TV. “It’s starting.”

Lucien hits a button on the remote as we all shush each other and focus on the show.

“Tonight on *Newsline*,” the announcer booms in his breaking news voice as the theme music rises. “You’ve seen the headlines. The billionaire. His missing wife. Her sudden reappearance. And now...Murder? Is this a real-life *Gone Girl*? Or something far more sinister?”

“Jesus Christ.” Lucien downs his whiskey in an audible gulp and crosses to the bar to splash a hefty refill into his glass.

“Socialite Ravenna Winter’s first and only interview — her final words — is a *Newsline* exclusive,” the announcer concludes. “Tonight.”

“Good evening,” says the show’s star Jeannie Howard, now sitting at her desk in the studio. She’s suitably grim for the occasion wearing a black dress that perfectly complements her caramel skin. Her brown eyes are suitably grave and her natural corkscrew hair pulled back in a low bun for the occasion is a chef’s kiss of solemnity. “Little did I dream several days ago, when Ravenna Winter secretly reached out to

me to tell her story, all the twists and turns her story would take in just a few short days. And she'll share her story with you in its entirety. In her own words. From the grave. Words that, by the way, Newsline has turned over to the police investigating her death on that lonely beach. Her private family funeral is scheduled for tomorrow. Her husband, billionaire Lucien Winter, who police claim is not a suspect at this time, has declined to comment for this story. And now? We begin with a reminder of the players involved."

"So they're not even going to make a stab at keeping this impartial," says Roman beside me.

"Are you surprised?" Lucien says, heading back to his armchair.

Roman snorts. "Not even a little."

Me? I'm riveted by the recap, which includes early pictures of Lucien and Ravenna that I hadn't seen online. A snippet of their wedding video showing Ravenna in that spectacular dress upstairs, diamonds glittering at her ears, neck and wrist as she gazes adoringly at Lucien, who gazes adoringly back. News footage from Ravenna's boating accident and disappearance.

I peel my attention away from the screen long enough to glance at Lucien, but he's doing his Sphinx routine and is unblinking as the light from the images on the screen flicker across his face.

"And there's a new player in this drama," Jeannie continues. "A young woman who ____"

"Oh, my God," I cry, sitting up straight and splashing my drink in my own lap in my shock. "It's me."

“Are you surprised?” Lucien asks again.

“Yes.” They got —holy shit— a picture of me and my dad from somewhere. A picture of me smiling at my graduation ceremony at the beginning of the summer. And then there’s — “Oh, my God,” I say again, almost too breathless to even get the words out — footage of me from the other day, looking scared and panicky as I’m jostled by the paparazzi and Hank swoops in to throw me into the car. I look like some unfortunate scandal-plagued actress who’s in danger of being trampled by photographers willing to do anything for the money shot. Then they show a wider angle of the incident and I discover for the first time how many photographers were there. At least eight. And how aggressively they bumped and shouted at me. Funny how I lived it and didn’t even fully realize. But there’s something about seeing it on the big screen that —

“Fuck,” Lucien murmurs, more to himself than to any of us. He shoots me with a penetrating sidelong look, then refocuses on the screen. He doesn’t need to say a word for me to know what he’s thinking, which is the same thing that I’m thinking:

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Thank God he sent someone to protect me. I don't know what would've happened otherwise.

“And now, here she is. In her own words,” Jeannie says from the studio, and that's all the warning we have before the scene switches and fills the screen. I thought I was braced for this moment, but I'm still startled to see her alive again in all her vibrant natural beauty. She's wearing jeans and a white linen shirt, her skin glowing and fresh even with her forehead bandage, brows dark, red lips plump and pouty and eyes luminous.

It's wild how jarring it is to see her like this. I half expect her to step out from behind the screen and resume her place here at Ackerley. I don't know how everyone else is taking this, but we all wait, riveted and frozen.

“Ravenna, welcome,” Jeannie says. “How are you feeling?”

Ravenna pauses to think it over. “Nervous,” she finally says with a tremulous smile.

“Why nervous?” Jeannie asks.

“I've never told my story before,” Ravenna says. “I've never felt brave enough.”

Sympathetic nod from Jeannie. “First things first. You're wearing a bandage. What happened to your head?”

“It's not that big a deal.” Ravenna touches the bandage with one of her delicate hands. “I slipped and fell on the rocks near Ackerley the other day when it was

raining. Minor concussion. It's fine."

Daniel and Lucien exchange a look.

"It's plausible," Daniel says, shrugging. "The rocks were slippery that night."

"So that much of her story could be true," Lucien says thoughtfully.

"Let's go back a few years," Jeannie says. "You were in a boating accident."

Ravenna looks grave now. "Yes."

"Your sailboat capsized in Manhasset Bay off Ackerley," Jeannie continues.

"Yes," Ravenna says again.

"Ravenna, you disappeared. You were presumed dead. For years. What happened to you?"

Ravenna hesitates, her chin wobbling. A tear drops, and it's the most beautiful tear I've ever seen in my life. Crystalline against her vivid green eyes, leaving a perfect trail down her exquisite cheek before she hastily swipes it away. "I hate that I caused so much trouble. And the expense of the search. I feel terrible about that. But I had to disappear. I had no other choice."

"I don't understand," Jeannie says, her voice hushed now as she leans in. "What do you mean?"

Another beautiful tear falls. "I mean that I was afraid Lucien was going to kill me." Ravenna takes a deep breath, the picture of a brave battered wife. "So I had to fake my own death."

I cry out, pressing my hand to my chest. I'd run a million different scenarios in my head. Ways she might try to explain her lengthy disappearance. Kidnapping. Sex trafficking. Amnesia. Alien abduction. That this isn't Ravenna at all but her long-lost identical twin sister.

Nothing like that.

"What?" shouts Roman beside me. He looks like he's ready to smash the TV. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Oh, my God," Daniel says with a disbelieving look in Lucien's direction.

And Lucien? No reaction. Not even a flicker of his eyes.

"Why would you fear that your husband would hurt you, Ravenna?" Jeannie asks in that dramatic stage whisper of a voice. "You had the perfect marriage. We've seen the photos and the videos. What on earth did you have to fear?"

"Nothing is perfect," Ravenna says in a brave show of wiping her eyes a final time before drying her fingers on her jeans and hitching up her chin. "I know how it looked from the outside. But Lucien wears a mask. And the man that the world sees is not the man I dealt with behind closed doors." She pauses. "I didn't realize it until we were on our honeymoon in Monte Carlo. When it was too late. A server flirted with me at dinner. Lucien got jealous. When we got back to our hotel suite, he said that I was flirting. That was the first time he ever slapped me across the face."

"What?" Roman shouts again, but all my attention is split between the screen and Lucien, who watches frozen and unblinking.

"He slapped you," Jeannie repeats, aghast.

“Yes.”

“What else did he do, Ravenna?”

Sad resignation from Ravenna as she reaches for the side table and hands something to Jeannie. “How much time do you have? I’ve got some pictures.”

Jeannie shifts through them, looking more and more disturbed. Then the camera zooms in for a close up, and it’s the picture I saw of Ravenna’s bruised face. The one Lucien said was from the time Ravenna’s tennis doubles partner accidentally hit her in the face with her racket.

“This is horrific,” Jeannie cries.

“Yes,” Ravenna says with a brave show of keeping her chin up.

“Did he also push you?” Jeannie says.

“Yes.”

“Punch you?”

“Yes.”

“Kick you?”

“Yes.”

“Emotional abuse?”

“Always.”

“Sexual assault?”

“Of course. Often.”

“Ravenna, was there no help available to you?” Jeannie asks.

“That’s the thing about Lucien.” Ravenna shudders at some memory. “A man like that? A billionaire? He does what he wants. People are property to a man like that. Who’s going to believe me? His investors? The hundreds of people he employs?”

Roman is out of his seat now, gesturing wildly at the screen and looming over Lucien. “How can you sit there listening to this bullshit?”

Lucien barely spares him a glance. “They sent over the transcript this afternoon for comment. I knew what she was going to say. I just didn’t know how she was going to say it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Roman says, pivoting away. Then there’s a crash behind us. Startled, I glance around to discover that Roman has swiped Lucien’s desk clean in his anger. Daniel hurries over and throws a restraining arm around his back.

“Lucien’s got it under control,” Daniel says.

“This shit is not under control,” Roman says, throwing him off. “People will believe her. None of it’s true, but she’s ruining his life!”

“Shhh,” Lucien says, still focused on the TV.

“But Ravenna, did you ever go to the police?” Jeannie says. “The world is full of

battered women. They don't fake their own deaths to escape and disappear for years at a time."

"I tried once or twice," Ravenna says, her gaze sliding out of focus as she frowns at some memory. "Lucien had things hushed up. He knows people. He pays people. I don't think people understand that when you're dealing with this kind of wealth, there's nothing you can't make happen. No one you can't buy off. Household staff. Police. Judges. A man like Lucien can get it done."

"So you faked your own death," Jeannie says. "But why then? If he'd been abusing you for years?"

"We had a party at Ackerley," Ravenna says. "Lucien saw one of his guests talking to me. The man was a little drunk. He stood a little too close. Whatever. That's no excuse. When the guests left, Lucien surprised me. I expected him to be in a rage, but he was calm. Icy calm. He said that I'd embarrassed him for the last time. And that's when I knew. He was going to do it."

A bark of bitter laughter from Lucien. "That's the night I caught her coming out of the bathroom after a quickie with one of our guests—a man she'd just met—and told her I wanted a divorce."

"I'd been saving my own money," Ravenna tells Jeannie. "Putting it in offshore accounts in case I ever got the chance to escape. I'd wanted to save money for a little while longer, but I knew if I didn't leave then, I'd never have another chance. He was going to hire someone to kill me and make it look like an accident. That would have been the smart move and Lucien is the smartest man I know. That way, he'd be free of me and wouldn't have to pay me a big divorce settlement. My time ran out. So I got a fake ID. Went out sailing. Capsized the boat. It's easy to do if you know how. And then I hid."

“Where did you go?”

“Auckland. New Zealand.”

A ripple of shock goes around the room at this revelation.

Jeannie shakes her head, not bothering to hide her disbelief. “Ravenna, if this is all true, you achieved the perfect disappearance. A real-life Gone Girl. Why come back? No one was looking for you. You were legally declared dead. You could have stayed gone forever.”

“I had to come back. I heard that Lucien was involved with someone,” Ravenna says.

“Jesus,” Daniel says. “How would she know something like that?”

“One of the maids, probably,” Lucien says. “Someone who hasn’t been with me for a while.”

“She’s evidently a woman too young and naive to know what she was getting herself into,” Ravenna continues. “Maybe it’s foolish, but I just couldn’t turn my back and let someone else suffer the way I did while I hid like a coward.”

“Can you believe this bullshit?” I mutter to no one in particular, choking back an unwilling laugh. “You almost have to admire her artistry, don’t you? Leonardo Da Vinci was the perfect renaissance man. Ravenna is the perfect liar. She’s like the Terminator of liars. She was made for it.”

“So, you did it to save Tamsyn Scott?” Jeannie says, incredulous now. “That’s very generous toward your husband’s girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“It’s not generosity,” Ravenna says, fully into her Joan of Arc routine. The only thing missing is a golden halo encircling her head. “It’s basic human kindness toward another woman. The kind of thing I would’ve wanted someone to do to protect me.”

I thought I had myself under control, but sudden outrage gets the best of me. “You tried to kill me, you psychobitch,” I shout at the television. “Why doesn’t Jeannie ask her aboutthat?”

“Because they shot the interview before she tried to kill you, Tamsyn,” Lucien says gently, but this reminder is no consolation for these outrageous lies. “Remember?”

Yeah, I remember. Ravenna wins again. “Fuck you, you bitch,” I shout at the TV, the most unhinged and impotent moment of my life. “Fuck. You.”

“Tamsyn. It’s okay,” Roman says soothingly.

“No, it’s not,” I say. “She wrecks everything. Think about everything she’s destroyed in her lifetime. Think about the final cost of all that malice. It’s incalculable. And she never had to pay a price.”

“She paid with her life,” Daniel says somberly. “That’s the ultimate price, isn’t it?”

The glaring truth of the statement shuts me up. Frowning, I turn back to the screen.

“What would you want to tell Tamsyn Scott if you had the chance, Ravenna?” Jeannie says. “Or our viewers, for that matter? And what are your plans now?”

Ravenna takes her time, frowning as she formulates her answer. Then she turns her head and looks directly at the camera and I feel the jolt of that bright green gaze boring into mine as strongly as if she was alive and here in the room with us right now. “I’d tell Tamsyn — or any other woman involved with a sexy and powerful man

like Lucien — to not trust yourself. Your instincts are bad when it comes to him. He will never change. You can't trust him. He will hurt you in the end. You have to get out and stay out. That's it." She nods and takes a breath, seemingly emboldened by her courage and honesty. "And I want everyone to know that my plans are to get a divorce and finally be free from Lucien. So I'm telling you now. I'm in perfect health. I'm not suicidal. If anything happens to me, no matter how it looks, it's because Lucien did it —"

There's more, but it's cut off by Lucien's vicious curse and the explosion of his whiskey tumbler as it hits the middle of the TV with brutal force and shatters into a million pieces, distorting Ravenna's image and sending shards of glass and droplets of liquid in every direction.

The rest of us cry out and leap to our feet, shocked and not quite sure what to do. I hurry forward, reaching for his arm as he starts to walk off. "Lucien..."

"Apologies, Ms. Scott." Lucien's smile is twisted and flat. His muscles are tight as he shakes me off. He never breaks stride. "I'm too tired to talk tonight. I've got to bury my beloved wife tomorrow."

14

Tamsyn

I catch Roman in the hallway outside Lucien's study just after midnight the following night. The lack of a summons from Lucien and lack of information about the funeral, the criminal investigation or anything else has forced me into the desperate act of coming down here. I've done the best I can to remain above the fray, but now my aloof ex-girlfriend routine is showing signs of serious strain.

I was cordially uninvited to Ravenna's small family funeral and would have

cheerfully RSVP'd fuck noif I had received an invite. Still, I watched from the shadows of the heavy draperies in the upstairs hallway as Lucien, Roman and Daniel somberly piled into a limousine this morning and sped off. I give myself an A for effort at keeping myself busy while they were gone. I finally discovered where the barn is and walked over to give Orion and his compatriots fresh apples. Then I came back and went for a swim in the pool. But I was back at my post in time to see the mourners return, their faces downturned as they filed back into the house and had their luncheon. I ate lunch by myself, then dinner by myself. I binge watched a season of Bridgerton for the millionth time and read romance novels. I felt the house's leaden silence inside every bone in my body. I waited for a text for Lucien. But none came.

Now here I am, hurrying forward to intercept Roman as he emerges from the study looking exhausted.

"Roman. Hi."

He's still dressed in his navy suit from the funeral and had reached up to yank his tie free, but now he glances around at me, startled. "Tamsyn. Hey. We just finished up our video conference with Hong Kong. You can go on in. Lucien will be glad to see you."

Wait, what? Video call? "Today?" I blurt before I can stop myself. "But Lucien just buried his wife. Couldn't it wait?"

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Kindly bemusement flickers across Roman's face. "No. Ravenna just trashed Lucien's reputation on national TV on top of the existing investigation. Investors are freaking out. These things don't wait."

I nod, feeling ridiculous. Every now and then an issue pops up that reminds me of the vast gulf between my world and Lucien's, and this is one of those times in glaring neon lights. I don't know what I expected. Something along the lines of a note from the doctor to get a high school student with a nasty case of the flu out of his calculus final, I suppose. "Right. Of course."

"And have you heard the latest? We've got protesters outside the gates. Calling Lucien a wife beater." He grimaces. "And worse."

This nightmare just goes on and on. I can't begin to imagine how Lucien feels. "Oh, God."

"Anyway, I'm beat," Roman says, starting to continue his way. "Time for bed."

"Actually, I was looking for you," I call after him.

He turns back, frowning. "Me? Everything okay?"

My cheeks immediately overheat. "Everything's fine with me," I say quickly. "I was just wondering... How is Lucien holding up?"

He gives me a funny look. "You want to know how he's doing?"

Rarely have I felt so lame. “Ah, yes.”

“You mean after losing you, losing his reputation, possibly losing the company our family has spent generations building, burying the resurrected wife that he hated and becoming a suspect in her death? When he’s got people spray painting murderer on the gates surrounding our house? How’s he doing after that?”

Yeah, okay. I’m a moron. “Roman...”

“Go talk to him,” he says, jerking his thumb at the study door.

He’s right. I know he’s right. But my feet are still frozen to the floor and I’m still the world’s biggest coward. I’m like one of those stupid romance heroines who is too hotheaded to let the duke grovel when he tries. I’m pathetic. I know it. But I’m starting to realize that the thing I’m most afraid of is myself. Because Lucien hurt me and the police suspect him of murdering his wife. Yet I still love him as desperately as I ever did. I’m still willing to believe in him. What kind of fool does that make me that I’m so willing to ignore all the red flags flapping in my face? “He just buried his wife. Maybe it’s a bad time. Maybe he needs space.”

“From you?” He shakes his head, mutters something indistinct but disbelieving, paces a few steps away and comes right back. “I don’t know what’s going on with you two,” he says, and I’m not prepared for the sudden harshness in his voice. “But if I had someone who looks at me the way you and Lucien look at each other...? If I had another chance with the person I love? The one I can’t live without?”

He chokes back his words, blinking furiously. Hang on. Are those tears in his eyes? I think they are. Which makes me wonder—is he talking about me and Lucien? Or himself?

“If I had your chance at happiness, you’d better believe I’d put a lot more effort into

working things out than you two are doing. I hope I'd be smart enough to know when I had something worth saving. And you'd better believe I've already told my jackass brother the same thing."

He walks off with a final pointed look, leaving me standing there like an idiot, his scathing bombshell still smoldering in my face. That's when I suddenly get sick of myself. It's not that I think Roman is right about Lucien and me working things out and getting back together. That'll never happen. While I may succumb to occasional moments of weakness where my overheated body is concerned, I don't plan to walk down that road again. But I am mature enough to recognize that I still have lingering feelings for Lucien. It's been an eventful twenty-four hours. I can put my big girl panties on and go in there and ask him how he's doing. There's no shame in that. I'm a compassionate person. It's what I do.

So I walk the last few steps to the ajar door, where I raise my hand to knock. Until I see him and all my best laid plans scatter.

He's sitting in front of his computer monitors, their glow casting his face in the harshest possible light. Dark smudges of exhaustion threaten to swallow his eyes. His cheekbones and jawline are all unyielding angles as he sheds the black jacket from his funeral suit and yanks his tie loose. Once he's tossed his clothing onto the console behind his desk, he leans back in his tufted leather chair and lets his eyes rolled closed, his shoulders slumping with exhaustion. I watch as he stays like that for several seconds, the ache inside me gathering strength and squeezing my heart, no matter how aloof I pretend to be. Then he rests his elbows on the desk and runs his hands over the top of his head until his hair is a wreck. He gives himself two or three seconds of this before snapping himself out of it as though he's flipped some invisible switch. Then he straightens, opens his eyes, rotates the kinks out of his shoulders and starts tapping away on his keyboard, his usual extreme competence once again firmly in place.

I step forward out of the shadows into his office and clear my throat, praying that by the time I reach his desk I'll have some idea what to say.

He pauses and glances up, his eyes widening at the sight of me. "Tamsyn." He says it with the same quiet reverence with which you might say *Madame President* or *Your Majesty*. And something flickers on in his expression that looks a lot like hope. "Hey."

"Hey."

Mutual staring ensues, punctuated only by my mouth opening and closing as I flounder hard enough to give myself an injury.

"Did you..." He gestures me to one of the chairs in front of his desk. "What brings you down here?"

"I was just wondering how the funeral went."

Another pause. This one is longer and much more painful because I see that glow slowly leave his eyes. It's like watching the light from a flashlight extinguish itself as its battery dies, leaving you in the dark heart of a cave by yourself. You're fucked and you know it. "You want to know about *Ravenna's* funeral?"

"Well...yeah."

He blinks. Then he nods, those lush lips of his twisting into something cold and sardonic. "*Ravenna's* funeral was great. As funerals go. Plenty of white orchids. I had the violinist play *Adagio* for Strings. The song from *Platoon*. It was appropriately tragic. *Ravenna* would've loved it. There wasn't a wet eye in the house. Oh, and the police came."

“What?”

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“Yeah.” Tight smile. “They like to come and watch the main suspect in homicide cases like these. See if he acts suspicious. So that was fun.”

“I had no idea.”

He resumes tapping on the keyboard, looking bored now. “Oh, and I’ve got protesters now. Did you hear about that? They’ve even shown up outside our offices in the city. So that’s fun. If there’s nothing else...? I’ve got a lot of work to do. My personal drama is threatening to tank my family business. The company was worth just over a billion when our parents died. Roman and I worked our asses off. Now it’s worth just over nineteen billion. Well, it was. Before the stock market opened today. Now it’s on a trajectory to be sold at five cents a share by the end of the week. So I’ve got a long night ahead of me. I still need to speak to Seoul.”

“Okay.”

“Sorry I don’t have time for a quick fuck tonight. I know you hate to go to bed without it. But don’t forget your nightcap. You can take it with you. But do come back if you ever want to discuss why I did what I did or if I killed my wife. The important things that we need to talk about. I’ll be sure to make time for that.”

15

Tamsyn

I stiffen and whip back around to face him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m hoping that one day soon you’ll get tired of hiding in your room and pretending you don’t still love me,” he says, staring me hard in the face.

So there they all are at long last. All the elephants I’ve been ignoring. Crowded into the room with us, waving their trunks around and ready to trample us with an enthusiastic rampage.

I’m too shocked to speak for a moment. Too undone by his gall. Until sudden rage consumes me in a white-hot flame and makes my voice shake as I discover that I want this talk and this fight. I need them. And I’m sick of myself. I never dreamed I was such a coward.

“What’s the puzzle, Lucien? What’s to discuss, Mister We Need to Talk? I already know why you did what you did — because you’re as cruel as that psycho wife you just buried.” I almost stop there, but I can’t slow myself down now that I’ve started. The genie is out of the bottle and he’s the one who lifted the lid. Let him deal with it. “The only difference is that Ravenna was kind enough to try to kill me physically. You tried to kill me emotionally. Which was a million times worse.”

He surges to his feet and hurries around the desk, arms outstretched. “I did what I had to do to protect you.”

I bark out a laugh. “You ripped my heart out to protect me? Wouldn’t it have been easier just to hire those secret security guards of yours?”

“No. Because when she set that fire, Ravenna showed herself to be as dangerous as I always feared she was. But it wasn’t directed at me. It was directed at you. And I can’t have that.”

I almost choke on the bitterness of my laugh. “Oh, you can’t have that. That explains it all.”

“Have you spend your life as the target of my psychopathic wife? A woman who was capable of faking her own death and sneaking onto my property despite all the measures I put in place to keep her away?” A new stillness comes over him, absolute and impenetrable. And suddenly the pyramids in Egypt are more movable than he is. “No. I’m not having that. Better for you to hate me but be free to live your life and let me deal with Ravenna. She was my burden to bear. Not yours. Never yours.”

“Well, thank you for all that nobility on my behalf.” I lace the words with all the venom inside me and hurl them at him. “I’ve been really free as I cry myself to sleep every night thinking about the look on your face when you smashed me like a bug and then threw me away.”

His expression softens as he comes closer, reaching for me. “Tamsyn...”

“And you want to know the funny thing? Well, two funny things, actually. I knew you were lying when you sat there and told me you didn’t love me.”

“I know you did.” He looks so stricken at the memory that I almost feel sorry for him. “I could barely force myself to get it out.”

“But I also knew— from the second we danced together on the cruise— that you would break my heart one way or the other. I just never imagined how painful it would be.” My voice cracks. I hate myself for it. But I need to get it all out. “In my wildest dreams, I never imagined that anything other than someone dying could make me feel this shitty.”

“I didn’t know what else to do, Tamsyn. I wanted to keep you safe.”

“And I wanted to be with you no matter what!”

“How long were you going to be with me if I couldn’t stop Ravenna from taking

another crack at you and maybe finishing you off that time? You think it was easy to do the right thing?"

A new wave of rage makes me shout. Who knows. Maybe the next one will make me pick up a lamp and throw it across the room. "I don't care about your moral dilemmas. Do you know what a mind fuck it was for me to know you love me but were still willing to stab me in the heart like that? What was I supposed to do with that? And Iknewyou were lying. Iknewit!"

"I know." His mouth twists until he can barely get any words out. "That's why I had to tell you that I followed you to Europe. Maybe if you knew what kind of man I really am, that would make it easier for you to leave."

God. There are so many twisted layers to this pile of elephant shit between us. I want to ask, but it's like English is no longer my first language and I don't know what to do with words. "So that was true?"

A sharp nod. "Yes," he says, staring me in the face.

I don't know what to do with this information. Any of it. "Well. I don't know what to say. Other than congratulations on a perfectly executed plan."

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“You think it was easy? You think I wanted to do it? Don’t you think I felt like I was dying? Like I’d rather die than push away the one person I need to live?”

“Maybe, but you did it anyway, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Because I’m nothing. You’re everything. My feelings don’t matter. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you’re safe—especially after the fire. And if that means sacrificing my own happiness, I’m glad to do it. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“What do you want, Lucien?” I sound strangled now. “A round of applause for your nobility? A medal? A parade in your honor? Well, I don’t forgive you! Fuck you!”

“Understood,” he says lightly. Too lightly. I sense a trap. “But I have a question for you: what would you have done if Ravenna tried to kill me? What would you have done to protect me?”

I stiffen, a sudden red haze descending on my vision. My inner Incredible Hulk wakes up and begins destroying everything in sight. I don’t manage to say any words, but I suspect that the way I’m suddenly curling my lips and in danger of baring my teeth says it all.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, and I hate him anew for it. He doesn’t seem triumphant. He just seems certain. And that’s bad enough.

I gesture toward the door, but it suddenly seems very far away and I have no confidence that my wobbly legs will get me there. “You wanted to get rid of me, you got rid of me. I’m only back temporarily. Are we done? I’m all talked out.” I take off

without waiting for an answer, but he hurries around me, blocking me.

“We aren’t done talking. And we aren’t over. Ravenna’s dead now. If I can keep myself out of prison, there’s no reason why you and I can’t be together.”

“No reason?” A burble of hysteria erupts, making me laugh shrilly. But there’s also a sob inside there somewhere. “No reason? There is a reason. You’re a liar, a manipulator and now also apparently a stalker, and I don’t trust you. Plus, it looks like you are about to be arrested for murdering your wife. You want a reason why we can’t be together? Pick one.”

He recoils as though I just spat on him. And it’s funny how one second ago I lashed out, wanting to hurt him, but now I want to take it all back if it will wipe that desolation off his face.

“I’m not saying I’m a prize,” he says quietly, coming even closer. “But we’re good together when we’re not dealing with all this other bullshit. We still love each other. And you and I both know this isn’t over. Tell me I’m wrong.”

We stare at each other. His gaze is hot. Hard. Searching. As vulnerable as I feel.

I turn away, shaking my head and dropping onto the sofa because he’s far too close and his eyes always see too much. They always zero in on the one thing I want to hide from him with the unerring accuracy of a heat seeking missile.

“Leave me alone, Lucien,” I say, still shaking my head as I press a hand to my chest. Because now, on top of every other fucking thing, I can’t quite catch my breath. “Why can’t you just leave me alone? Please. Can’t you see I can’t breathe?”

I think it’s a reasonable request, but Lucien the Merciless swoops in to take advantage of my weakness. Once again, he’s right there in my face, dropping to his

knees in front of me and caging me by planting his hands on the cushions on either side of me.

“I’m sorry.” I’m not prepared for the raw anguish in his voice or the turbulence in his eyes. “I’m sorry. But you have to forgive me.”

“I don’t forgive you,” I say, but I’m the liar now. Because part of my brain — the foolish part — is now standing in front of a white board drawing arrows and making calculations, trying to arrange things in a way that maybe this all makes sense. Maybe he did it to protect me. Maybe there is no reason why we can’t be together now. Maybe it would be safe to trust him again. Just this once. And I don’t want to be stupid here, but his hands have moved to my hips and he’s even closer, his face hovering a hair’s breadth from mine. “Only a fool would forgive you.”

“We can’t keep up like this, Tamsyn. It’s unnatural. We both know it. I’m on my knees. Please.”

He’s angling his mouth over mine now, his hands gliding up to cup my face as his fingers curl deep into my hair. In all the heat and emotion, with desire spiraling lower and my chin tipping up by itself, there’s no room for my rule about not kissing him. Worse, there’s no energy for me to keep blocking the door to keep him out of my heart.

“Why should I give you another chance? What would ever make you think that I would?”

“Because.” It takes him great effort to get the words out. When he does, I can barely hear his hoarse voice. “I have all the privilege in the world. But I’ve never been happier than I am when you smile at me. Just a random smile on a regular day is all I need. But I need it. So the next time you think there’s a power imbalance between us, remember that.”

Oh, God. I shake my head, my heart stuttering and stalling out. “Lucien...”

“And I plan to make it my life’s work to get you to smile at me every day.”

The worst part about this pretty speech is that he looks like he means every word. And it doesn’t matter whether I want to believe him or not. I just do.

I don’t know who moves first. But suddenly my hands are on his face and I’m slowly pulling him in. Our mouths come together in one lush nuzzle. One perfectly timed mutual sweep of tongues. And then he’s making a broken noise of relief — of triumph and joy — and we’re right back where we were, wrapped up in each other as though there was never any interruption. Could never be another interruption.

I taste tears. I suspect that they’re mine but I can’t swear that none are his. I revel in the salty taste and the sweet release. I want to keep kissing him exactly like this. To die like this. But it’s hard to kiss and smile and my smile cannot be stopped. When he pauses and I see the wonder in his shining eyes — the absolute adoration — I know I’ve made the right decision.

A startled laugh from him in response, swiftly replaced by a sweeping look of illicit purpose as he reaches for the bodice of today’s little sundress and rips it open down the middle with a loud tearing sound that’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.

We come together hard, all frantic heat. He yanks my strapless bra down and roughly runs his hands over my bare breasts. My hips. My thighs. He presses me onto my back, wedging himself between my spreading thighs and looming over me as my poor panties die the same death as my dress and get tossed aside. I start to reach for his jacket so I can push it off his shoulders, but there’s no time for that. No need. I don’t need his jacket off for him to fuck me and neither of us can wait.

“Hurry,” I say, reaching for his buckle and cocking my hips for him. “Don’t make me

wait.”

“Don’t worry.”

He shoves my hands aside and takes over, yanking that zipper open and freeing himself as he reaches between us. He doesn’t waste time stroking my clit. Why bother? We both know I’m already soaking wet for him. I wrap my legs around his waist, the feeling of his belt hard against my inner thigh as he enters me with a single sharp thrust that has me seeing stars. We both cry out, staring at each other, faces twisted with gathering ecstasy and mouths agape.

“I love you.” His voice shakes. “You’re my life.”

“I know,” I say, because I do.

I crane my neck and lick my way back into his mouth, then flex my legs to bring him closer. He palms my bare ass. Hard. And then he fucks me as though both our lives depend on it, those swiveling hips unerringly hitting my sweet spot with the kind of precision that would make a NASA scientist weep with envy. It doesn’t take long. Thirty seconds? Forty-five? That’s all I need before I find myself screaming joyous nonsense wrapped around his name as the spiraling pleasure reaches its tipping point, making my back arch, my head fall back, my eyes roll closed and my toes curl.

He’s right there with me, his entire body stiffening. I cup the hard globes of his ass, absorbing his pleasure with my spasming hips and reveling in the fact that we’re back together like this, and I still have this power over him and, best of all, he loves me the way part of me always knew he did.

Do we pass out once we’ve wrung all possible pleasure from each other? Sleep? Slip

into an alternate dimension? No idea. But I know some time passes. And I know he's still buried deep inside me when he raises his head and gives my cheek the gentlest possible kiss.

"So much for me being in control and doing things on my timeline," I say, trying to scowl and failing miserably. "Alas."

There's the flash of his beloved grin. Less pirate-like this time. All quiet satisfaction. "We've got to get rid of this idea of control. Think of it as me doing my best to restore the natural order of things between us. How's that?"

"I can live with that," I say, drowsy now. "Truce."

"Good. I hate to say this at a time like this." He pauses, his voice a velvety rumble in my ear. "But you need to know I didn't kill her." He stares down at me, waiting, willing me to believe it. "And I didn't hire anyone to do it."

I lift my heavy lids and try to shift gears to keep up with him. "I know."

"Do you?" he says, one of those dark brows going up.

I hesitate. I don't mean to. But I do. His expression falls accordingly.

"Ninety-eight percent of me believes you." I smooth the hair away from his temples to soften the blow. I don't know what's happened to the other two percent. I just know that it's not currently present and accounted for. "Can't that be enough for right now? That, and us being back together?"

He smiles, leaning down to kiss my forehead. "Yeah. I'll take that."

"Good."

“I am going to need you to put your necklace back on, though.”

I wordlessly reach for the pocket of my ruined dress, pull out the necklace and dangle it in his face. He grins. I blush like an idiot. Then I put it back on with him watching me the whole time.

Once that’s settled to our mutual satisfaction, he gathers me closer and we drift along for a while, our heads together on the pillow, legs intertwined. I’m beginning to think he’s fallen asleep, but then he surprises me.

“When I first saw you...”

This reference to our meeting at the LaGuardia departures lane grabs my attention, sleep forgotten. “Yes...?”

“When I first saw you, I thought...Don’t let her go.”

My heart swoops like a kite on a breezily perfect spring day. “You did?”

“Yeah. There was nothing normal about it. Nothing rational. It was just emphatic.” A long pause. “As if my life depended on it. Because it did.”

“What do you mean?” I say, shifting to my side to face him because I don’t want to miss a single detail of this confession.

He’s got his elbow bent and his head propped on his hand, his unfocused gaze zeroed in on the memory as he quietly continues. “I’m not sure what I mean. Even now.” Helpless laugh. “How do you describe a lightning strike on top of your head? Do you say that it’s hot? That it’s bright? That it’s life-changing? That you can’t get over it or pretend it never happened? I just knew that I couldn’t let you go. Wouldn’t. I knew that you were my answer.”

No one has ever or could ever stop my heart the way he does. “Your answer? To what?”

His gaze flicks back to me. Focused and steady. Luminous. All joy. “Everything.”

I’m smiling again. He’s staring again.

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“I can’t believe I had that effect on you,” I say, and I feel the blush rising up my neck and across my cheeks.

“Believe it. But how could I explain any of that without scaring you away? Do you know how freaked out I was? You think I wanted to find myself in Barcelona? Dashing to men’s stores trying to find two weeks’ worth of clothes and praying I’d even get a cabin on the ship? All while ditching the important meeting in Boston that was the reason I was at the airport in the first place?”

“I thought you looked out of place. You only had a briefcase when you got on the plane.

“Indeed,” he says darkly.

“A normal man would have asked me for a drink in the city when we got back,” I point out, my cheeks still burning.

“Nothing about us is normal.” He grins in a devastating display of dimples. “But I thought about it.”

“And...?”

“Fuck that.” I hate to say it, but I find something about his pirate’s smile and his unapologetic stance to be wildly arousing. He saw me. He wanted me. The end. Isn’t that what every woman wants? “Would you rather have a cosmopolitan at some random bar in the Meatpacking District? Or fun adventures all over the Mediterranean?”

“No comment, you arrogant ass,” I say, laughing, smacking him on the butt and trying to turn my head away when he kisses me. But he’s not having it and neither am I, to be honest. He seals his mouth over mine, a tender kiss so perfect it’s like a direct pipeline to heaven.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” he says, his expression darkening when he lets me up for air. “You know that, right?”

I could do without this reminder of the rest of the world, but I nod anyway, my heart heavy now. “I know.”

He gives me a look of purest determination. “I was always going to do whatever I could to stay out of jail. But now they we’re back together?” He shakes his head, all grim intensity. “I’m not going to let anything stand in our way. Especially now that we’ve gotten past most of your doubts.”

“Good.”

“I need you to have faith in me. Can you do that?”

There’s only one answer to that. The truest answer I could ever give him. “I’ll do anything for you. As long as we’re together. I can deal with everything else.”

“Same,” he says, tightening his arms around me again as he leans in for another kiss. “Same.”

16

Lucien

Tamsyn shows me no mercy the following morning. She rides me long and hard, her

eyes glazed with passion, her head thrown back with her hair forming a wild halo around her damp face and a half smile on her parted lips. Sweat glistens between her jiggling breasts with their pink nipples and I gotta admit — I love these visuals. I'm not sure who's holding who tighter. Me, gripping the curves of her hips as they rotate against me or her gripping my flexing hips between her toned thighs?

All I know is that if there's a better way to start a day than with us fucking after sleeping together in our bed, where we belong, I don't want to know about it.

I meet her thrust for thrust, addicted to the snug slickness of her sweet little pussy. My groans are getting ridiculous at this point. I'm at my tipping point, my balls contracted and ready to go with an orgasm for the record books. I feel the strain of holding myself back in all my bunched muscles. But I'm not fucking coming. Not until she comes first. That's the only way we roll around here.

Suddenly she cries out, all high-pitched, shocked ecstasy, her expression twisting with the delight of it. Another glorious visual seared in my memory banks forever. And that's all I need. I let go, shooting off in an uncontrolled fit of spasms like a firework crocheting across the room. When my bucking beneath her threatens to toss her to the floor, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close, reveling in the vibrancy of her body against mine. The warmth. The strength. That thrilling scent of her lilies-of-the-valley fragrance. Her croons of satisfaction as she nuzzles my neck.

It's a moment of unsurpassed joy. Enough to choke me with it. Because I came so close to losing all this forever. Actually, who am I fooling? I'm still close to losing all this forever. Trapped in this purgatory waiting for the police to make their next move, I know happiness, but I don't know peace. Maybe I'll never know it.

But I have this moment with Tamsyn. That's enough for now. So when she wearily raises her head, brushes her hair out of her face and smiles that glorious smile at me, all sunshine and sparkling diamonds in her brown eyes, I smile back. And then we

laugh together, wrecked and relieved to once again be here like this. Where we belong.

It's the perfect moment. Until my godforsaken phone buzzes on the nightstand.

I scowl but reach for it anyway. There's too much going on these days for me to ignore calls. "Sorry," I tell her as she eases off me and settles next to me, propping her head on her hand. "It's my investigator."

"Wait, what? You hired an investigator?"

"To look into Ravenna's last couple of days and help me prove I didn't do it. And to find Windwood."

"Well, talk to him," she says quickly, looking hopeful now. "Take it."

"Yeah?" I bark by way of greeting.

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“I have news,” he says without preamble. “I’ll be there in thirty.”

Then he hangs up.

I turn to Tamsyn, who’s watching me closely. “He has news for me. Pray it’s good news.”

“Prayers up,” she says with a grim nod. She throws the covers back and starts to get out of bed. “I’ll find something to do to stay out of your hair. Just make sure you text me when you’re done meeting with him. I’m dying to know what’s going on.”

I also get up, relishing the quick but tantalizing view of her round ass before she makes it disappear by sliding her arms into her robe. It’s a little too soon for me to feel ready to go again, but the good thing about this reconciliation is that we’ll be together again tonight. And that’s a wonderful thing. “Why not come with me? This concerns your life, too. Right?”

“Right.” She eyes me warily. “That’s very transparent of you. Not manipulative at all.”

Glad she noticed. “I’m working on doing things different with you this time. Better.”

She hesitates, looking startled but delighted as she belts her robe. “Really?”

“Really. I don’t want to mess things up again. Plus, I don’t want to let you out of my sight or out of arms reach now that we’re back together. Maybe I shouldn’t admit that. Maybe that’s too overbearing for you...?”

She gives it the old college try, but she can't hold back her smile or her flush of pleasure any more than I can hold back mine. "It's wildly overbearing. But I'm willing to overlook it. Just this once. Shower?"

"If you insist," I say, already on my way.

We're dressed and ready with time to spare. She takes my hand as we leave the bedroom and start down the staircase, another small pleasure that thrills me to the roots of my hair. "You think Chef made pancakes for breakfast today? I'm in the mood for pancakes."

"I thought you understood." I reel her in for a quick kiss. "You can have pancakes every day of the week for the rest of your life if you want. Chef is here to do what we ask him to do."

"Yeah, but I don't want to be too much trouble —oh, Daniel. Hi."

I've been so wrapped up in her that I hadn't seen Daniel come out of the dining room, but there he is with his steaming cup of coffee, staring up at us and our happy faces with open astonishment. But no one is more astonished at my sudden reversal of fortune than I am.

"Tamsyn. Lucien." He recovers quickly and raises his cup in a toast to us. "Things are well, I take it?"

I only manage to squash about 85% of my grin. "Things would be great if my investigator has good news for me. He's on his way. You should stick around."

"You got it," Daniel says.

My investigator, Randy Jacobs, is the best in the business, which is why I trust him

with two huge tasks at once—finding Winwood and looking into Ravenna’s death. He arrives just as we grab coffee and convene in my study, then wastes no time pulling something up on his iPad and connecting it to the TV screen.

“What’s this?” I say, squinting at the white overhead images of a parking lot at night and trying to come up to speed. “Is that the parking lot from the inn?”

“That’s right. Footage from the inn’s security cameras the night you kicked Ravenna out of the house,” Randy says. “Watch.”

We watch. And see a Jaguar zoom into view and lurch to a stop in a parking space about twenty or thirty feet away from the camera, closely followed by a Range Rover that parks in the space behind her.

“Oh, my God,” Tamsyn says. “It’s Ravenna.”

“And Winwood,” Daniel adds.

We watch as Ravenna gets out of the Jag, her flimsy robe falling away from her pale legs as she climbs out. Winwood gets out of the Range Rover and intercepts her. She seems startled. They speak urgently, with Ravenna gesturing toward the inn and Winwood moving his hands in an unmistakable calm downgesture. Ravenna nods, takes a deep breath and wipes her eyes. And then she looks up at Winwood and watch it all happen as though I’d scripted it myself. It would almost be comical if the situation didn’t have such dire consequences for me and my life.

Ravenna takes another look at him. A good look. The footage may be somewhat grainy, but some things are hard to miss, especially when you’ve seen this performance before. No one does seduction quite like Ravenna. She eases closer to him, tipping her face up. Winwood goes still. She hesitates, looks away, then looks back at him, the kind of tremulous look that says that she needs fucking and/or saving

and Winwood is the only man in the world — hell, the universe — up to the job.

I ought to know. I was the recipient of that same act more times than I care to remember.

To his credit, Winwood tries to resist. He does a decent job. I'll give him that. It's not a good idea. We shouldn't. I work for Lucien. That's his body language. But he's no match for Ravenna. No one ever is. And when she steps forward that last little bit, presses her body full against him, wraps her arm around his neck and licks her way deep into his mouth, Winwood resists. For a full half second or so. Then he returns the kiss with compounded interest and helps himself to handfuls of her ass.

Tamsyn, Daniel and I all react at the same time.

"Iknewit," I say.

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“Wow,” Daniel mutters, turning away from the screen.

“Oh, my God,” Tamsyn says, glancing at all of us in turn. “Is this for real?”

“It’s for real,” says Randy as he hits a button on his phone. “Lucien was right. And there’s more.”

The scene on the television switches to an elegant corridor inside the inn with bedrooms on each side. The time stamp says that it’s three hours later. Nothing happens for several seconds. Then one of the doors opens midway down the hall and out comes Winwood. He’s got his clothes straight and his hair in place. There’s that long military training for you. But a female arm reaches out to grab him when he starts to walk off, and he turns back to give Ravenna a thorough goodbye kiss. Then he strides off down the hallway, shooting a furtive glance behind him to make sure no one sees him before disappearing. He’s wearing the satisfied and vaguely dazed look of a buck up to his balls in fertile does during rutting season in the forest.

“That’s it,” Randy says, turning the TV off. “Great thinking, Lucien.”

“Yeah.” I shake my head, shocked by this additional good fortune. “I may not know much, but I know Ravenna and how she operates. Operated.”

“Wait, what?” Tamsyn glances at me. “You knew something was going on with her and Winwood? But how?”

I shrug away the implication that I have some sort of special powers of deduction. “I didn’t know. Not for sure. I just caught a vibe between them that night. And

Winwood's a good-looking guy. Ravenna hates to let those go to waste."

"Wow," Daniel mutters again.

"So I asked Randy to look into it," I tell Tamsyn. Then I turn to Randy. "How did you get this footage, by the way?"

Randy flaps a hand. "Through legal-ish means. Not the kind of thing you want to bother yourself with."

Well, he's right about that. "Has the inn turned it over to the police yet?"

"They will tomorrow, they said."

"This is great news," I say, relieved. "This proves that Winwood had a motive to hurt her. Now we just need to find him."

"Hang on," Tamsyn says, frowning. "How does this prove that Winwood wanted to hurt her? It looks like they were getting along like a guest cottage on fire. Why would he suddenly want to kill her?"

I think that over, trying to find the best way to describe the phenomenon. "The thing about Ravenna was that she turned on a dime. She was happy to fuck someone now and then ghost him ten minutes later. Or worse, taunt him about not being able to satisfy her. Once she got what she wanted out of you, she had no use for you." I nod, liking my theory more and more the more I think about it. "My guess? Winwood is a no-nonsense kind of guy. He had to know I'd fire him if I found out about this. And if she taunted him about something? I don't think he's the kind of guy to let something like that go. He's old school. Proud. My way or the highway. Like I said, we need to find him. He's the key to everything."

Daniel looks doubtful. “I don’t know, Lucien. I’m not sure this video does you any good.”

“What are you talking about?” I say, frowning.

“I’m saying that this video gives you the motive for murder. Another motive.” Daniel’s expression turns grim. “The police will argue that you found out about her having an affair with your employee right under your nose. They’ll claim that this was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Maybe she taunted you with the affair. And maybe you killed her in a fit of jealous rage.”

I’ve already considered that very real possibility and am about to tell Daniel so when my phone buzzes. I check the display and discover that it’s my criminal defense attorney.

“What is it, Gray?” I say once I hit the button on the phone.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Gray says, sounding as grave as Daniel just did. “The police are on their way to Ackerley. They want to see you.”

17

Lucien

“We need the room,” I tell Randy and Daniel when I hang up, eager to have a minute alone with Tamsyn before my next doom-laden meeting. “Thanks.”

Randy gets up and heads for the door. “I’ll stay in touch.”

I stand and shake his hand. “I appreciate the hard work. Stay on it. I don’t need to tell you again— we need to find Winwood. The police need someone other than me to

point their finger at.”

“Understood,” he says, heading out.

I start to turn to Tamsyn, but Daniel steps into my line of sight. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything,” he says. “I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about. Forget I mentioned it.”

“It’s okay,” I say, also shaking his hand. “I appreciate the input.”

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He nods to both of us with the kind of solemnity that suggests he doesn't expect to see me again as a free man anytime soon, then follows Randy out, shutting the door behind him.

I turn to Tamsyn, trying to dismiss the worry I just saw in Daniel's expression, my morale now bottoming out at somewhere below sea level.

Tamsyn tries to say something but it takes her a second. Her eyes are a little too wide. Her breath is a little too shallow. She's trying to fight back the rising panic as the walls close in around us. So am I.

"What now?" she finally says. "What could the police want?"

"No idea."

She comes closer, then hesitates again. "What if they're coming to arrest you?"

There it is. The exact what if that's been running through my mind for the last several minutes. But I need to keep my head. "Like I said before, I pay my attorneys big bucks to keep me out of jail." I think that over and decide an addendum is appropriate. "And/or bail me out of jail ASAP. God forbid."

A hollow laugh from Tamsyn. "You have a plane. A passport. Tons of money. Probably offshore accounts somewhere. You should make a run for it before they get here."

I make a derisive noise. I can't quite tell whether she's serious or not. So I hate to

make the following admission. But if ever there was a time for the truth between the two of us, this is it. “I thought about it.”

“And...?” she asks with new urgency, dropping her voice.

“And I’m not going anywhere without you. You’re starting a new job you’re very excited about soon. I’m not going to condemn you to a life on the run.”

“Lucien...”

“No. We can have a good life here at Ackerley. We can have it all. We just need to fight for it.”

She takes a sobering breath, shaking it off. “You’re right. I just lost my head for a minute, but I’m tough. I’m a good fighter.”

That makes me to smile. She always knows the way. “I know you are,” I say, stress already easing off my shoulders.

A flash of a brave smile. Gone way too soon. “I could use a hug, though.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” I reach for her. “Come here.”

We come together hard and fast, pulling each other as tight as we can. There’s nothing sexual about it for once. Just vaguely panicked. I cup the back of her head, reveling in the thick silk of her hair. Rub her back and shoulders. Press my nose to her neck and breathe her in, shoring up all these impressions for the day that may come no matter how desperately I try to fight it off—the day when I’m on one side of bars, she’s on the other and we’re not allowed to touch.

The stark fear is enough to sink my morale to Marianas Trench levels. And that’s

before the sound of someone clearing their throat from the doorway interrupts us and Tamsyn quickly pulls free, averting her face and wiping her eyes.

We glance around. It's my security guy Hank, looking embarrassed.

"Sorry to interrupt," he hastily says.

"It's okay." I'm not ready to let Tamsyn go entirely yet, so I hang onto her hand. "Did you need something? I don't have long. The police are on their way with my lawyer."

"Actually, they're already here," he says, gesturing over his shoulder. "I just saw Maddie let them in and put them in the dining room. I just need a quick minute first."

"I should go," Tamsyn tells me.

I start to tell her it's okay, but Hank beats me to it. "It's okay. This concerns you, too, Tamsyn."

"What is it?" she says, frowning.

"I wanted to let you know that the police questioned me about the night you kicked Ravenna out, Lucien." Hank looks pained. "They wanted to know what you said to Ravenna."

I think back, but nothing in particular comes to mind. I was in such a black rage that I could have said anything and meant it. "You have to be more specific," I tell him.

Awkward silence while he reluctantly gets his words together. "You said you'd end the marriage one way or the other. And how it happened was up to Ravenna. Tamsyn was there. She heard it. So was Winwood."

I cringe as the memory comes back to me. “Right.”

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“You’ve been a good employer to me, Lucien.” He looks nervous now. “My loyalty is to you. I don’t think you did it. I want you to know that.”

I nod, grateful for support from whatever source. “Appreciated.”

“But I’ve got a family. I can’t lie to the police for you,” he concludes. “I told them the truth.”

That’s what I was afraid of. “I understand,” I say, extending my hand. “You’re a good man. Thanks for letting me know.”

He nods, shoots a final apologetic glance at Tamsyn, then heads out.

“You did say that,” she says quietly. “Oh, God. What if the police ask me about it?”

“Then you tell them the truth.”

“But...”

“I have to go,” I say, giving her a quick forehead kiss. “We’ll talk more later.”

I start to walk off. She hangs onto my hand, her grip surprisingly strong and insistent. But when I turn back to her, she shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know what to say. I just don’t want to let you go.”

“Same,” I say, coming back in for a final kiss.

She surprises me again, taking my face in her soft hands, her lips harder than usual. Maybe she's doing a little imprinting of her own. "I'll see you later," she says, letting me go and trying for an upbeat smile that doesn't turn up much at the edges.

But she does better than me because I can't get my smile working at all. I've got way too many knots in my gut. "See you later."

I quickly cross to the dining room, where a solemn assembly of faces rings the table. Gray. Detective Smith. Today's uniformed cops. I shake hands all around and give Gray a nod when he shoots me a covertkeep your fucking mouth shutlook. Then I sit and wait.

"I'll get right to the point," Detective Smith says, making a great show of plunking her phone down on the table between us. "I'm here as a courtesy to you, Mr. Winter. My office is grateful to your support over the years. So the higher ups are happy to bend over backwards for you. Me? I'd prefer to have you down at the office for a formal interview. But I don't get to decide. I'm recording. Just so you know."

"Understood," I say.

"The autopsy report is back although toxicology is still pending. As we suspected, Ravenna died from blunt force trauma to the back of the head. We'll make sure your lawyer gets a copy of the report."

I'm not sure what kind of reaction I should have to this information. When someone takes out the rabid wolf headed your way, you don't care much whether they use a rifle or a bow and arrow. You're just grateful that the threat has been eradicated. "I see."

"There was also evidence of sexual activity," Detective Smith continues.

“I haven’t had sex with Ravenna in years,” I say. I’m sure my revulsion at the idea shows on my face. Hopefully she’ll believe me.

“I’ll need a DNA sample to confirm that,” she says.

I open my mouth for quick agreement, but Gray puts a restraining hand on my arm.

“My client and I will discuss your request and get back to you as soon as possible. Is there anything else?”

A tinge of annoyance from Detective Smith but she quickly recovers. “Yes. We have video footage from the Shell station on the corner that shows your car driving toward the beach the night of Ravenna’s death.”

I don’t like the sound of that. “And...?”

“You previously told me that you weren’t near the beach that night,” she says.

“I wasn’t.”

“Well, you were close enough to be caught on the footage from the gas station,” she says flatly.

Shit. I remember now. And it’s looking worse for me by the second. “How do you know it was me? I’m sure dozens if not hundreds of people drove through there that night, and they didn’t kill Ravenna either.”

“I’ll send your lawyer a copy so you can see it for yourself. You zoomed right by in your Range Rover. We got a partial of your plates.”

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Shit. Fuck. I was driving the Range Rover that night.

She pauses to wait for my reaction. I make sure not to give her one. “You see how this looks, don’t you, Mr. Winter? You were in the vicinity the night your wife died. Your wife implicated you as a domestic abuser in her interview. She also produced old pictures looking like a battered wife. This isn’t painting a very flattering picture of you as a husband.”

I feel my lips twist, but I’m suddenly so angry that I can’t control my expression as I plant my hands on the table and lean in. Nor can I contain the righteous fury toward Ravenna that makes my voice shake. How many more times will she stick it to me from the other side of the grave? Ten? Fifty? A million? “I never laid a hand on Ravenna. I never harmed her. Not once. I don’t care what she said on TV the other night. Those pictures were from a tennis injury. She was playing doubles and her partner accidentally whacked her in the face with her racket.”

“Oh?” Detective Smith whips out her pen and pad. “What’s the friend’s name? We’d like to speak to her. Clear up that discrepancy.”

I slump back in my chair because Ravenna has won this round and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. “I don’t know.”

Detective Smith’s eyebrows do a slow climb toward her hairline. “You. Don’t. Know.”

What can I say? That Ravenna had a collection of mean girlfriends, none of whom I liked? That I avoided them whenever possible? That by the time of the tennis injury, I

was far beyond caring what happened in her life and with whom? “Someone from her tennis club. That’s all I know.”

“Fine. When did it happen?”

I wince because Detective Smith has me on the ropes and we both know it. “Don’t know that either.”

Detective Smith makes a derisive noise, but Gray swoops in to rescue my ass. “I assume we’re done here? Unless my client is under arrest...?” he says.

Pleasant smile from Detective Smith. “Not at all. I’m simply gathering information and sharing information.”

“Great.” Gray stands. “We appreciate the courtesy of you coming here for the interview. But it’s over.”

“Thank you for your time,” Detective Smith says, ever the crisp professional. “We’ll stay in touch. Remember what I said about leaving town, Mr. Winter. Lobbing a final pointed glance in my direction, she walks off with her minions, taking her recorder and shutting the door behind her.

“Fuck,” I say, also standing.

“Relax,” Gray says. “They’re trying to build a case against you, but it’s all circumstantial. Assuming your semen doesn’t turn up in Ravenna’s body...?”

“What?No. I told you.”

“Good.”

“Matter of fact, the security footage from the hotel shows that Ravenna and Winwood, my security guard who disappeared, were having a sexual relationship.”

His ears perk up. “What? Why didn’t you mention that just now?”

“Because my investigator got the tapes by means that may have been dubious. Plus, the tapes also give me a motive for killing Ravenna. So I wanted to run the issue by you before I mentioned it.”

“Good thinking.”

“But my investigator says the police will get the tapes tomorrow.”

“Well, the point is, they don’t have enough to arrest you yet. So that’s the good news.”

“Yet,” I echo dully.

Gray blows out a breath and stares at me long and hard. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it, Lucien. None of this is good.” A heavy pause. “We can’t afford one more piece of evidence against you, circumstantial or not. So you need to finish getting your legal affairs in order. Plus, the DA is running for reelection this year. Your head would make a good trophy on her wall for her law-and-order campaign. Detective Smith is by the book, but the rest of them aren’t. I’m going to do everything I can to prevent it, but...my best guess is that they’re going to do everything they possibly can to pin this on you and make it stick.”

Lucien doesn't hear me when I come into his study two nights later, which is no surprise. He's been distracted since the police were here the other day. Distracted with meetings morning to night. Distracted by the rumors of an imminent arrest and a grand jury.

The walls are closing in. Time is running out.

His mood reflects it. He sits in his leather chair by the fireplace in his shirtsleeves, his elbows resting on his knees and his chin resting on his fisted hands as he folds and unfolds his fingers. He stares at something remote that only he can see, his face downturned, his jaw tight and his expression shadowed. He's every bit the forbidding man I met that day in the departures lane at LaGuardia. He's a study in concentration. Or plotting. A man like this is not the kind of person you want to approach. I hesitate on the threshold, wondering if I should come back again in a few minutes.

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Maybe my churning thoughts are too loud, because he suddenly looks up, his expression softening when he sees me. That gives me just the encouragement I need. “Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” His expression clears a bit more. Not all the way to a smile, though. I get the feeling that the last two days have been so tough that he’s forgotten how. “Come in.”

“Not sure if I should,” I say, heading straight to him. I’ve got a sudden urge to smooth the hair away from his temples. It’s all ruffled, a sure sign he’s been running his hands over his head in frustration. “I hate to interrupt your scheming. You look like you’re playing 3-D chess in your mind.”

A flash of a smile. “Just planning. Come here.”

We reach for each other. He gives me just enough time to smooth his hair and kiss his forehead before he reels me all the way in, his arms, circling my waist with all the tenderness in the world and unyielding strength. Basically like two iron clamps encased in velvet. He murmurs something indistinct, pressing his face to my neck for a good long nuzzle. We stay like that for a minute, both eager to steal this little slice of heaven from yet another difficult day. Then it’s over. He lets me go and sits back in his chair, his sudden businesslike demeanor filling me with dread.

“We need to talk,” he says, gesturing me to the chair nearest his.

I sit and wait. The massive lump newly wedged at the base of my throat prevents me from saying anything.

“The police have me on video driving near the beach the night Ravenna died.” His gaze slides away from mine as he settles his elbows on his knees again. “I didn’t mention to them before that I was that close to the area.”

I hesitate. I want to reassure him, but my thoughts are spinning too hard as I try to come up to speed. “So... You, what? Lied to the police?”

“Nothing like that,” he says, blowing out a breath as he shakes his head. “I didn’t remember everywhere I went that night.”

My heart sinks. That’s not the kind of reassurance I’d hoped to hear right now. “You’re not the kind of man who doesn’t remember things, Lucien.”

Self-deprecating smile. “I disagree. When I’m missing you and you’re all I can think about. With the way I was feeling when you were gone? It’s a wonder I kept the car on the road at all.”

My heart melts into a gooey mess. What am I supposed to do with that? “So it’s my fault you didn’t tell the police the truth?”

“Not at all,” he says. “I take full responsibility for my actions. But I have a question: do you remember everything you did when we were apart?”

He’s got me there. It was only a few days, but they were the longest of my life. They passed in a blur of tears, anger, and bittersweet memories. “Touché.”

“I know it doesn’t look good, but I have some irons in the fire.”

“Like...? I could definitely use some good news.”

“I have a call out to Ravenna’s doctor from her hospital stay. I’m waiting for him to

call me back. I'm hoping he might reveal something else about her state of mind. Something that might help us."

"Yeah, but didn't he refuse to speak to you?" I say, frowning. "Because of Ravenna's right to medical privacy?"

"Yeah. She told him not to speak to me. Which suggests she had something to hide from me. I'm not sure if that doctor-patient privilege still applies now that she's dead," he says. "It's worth a shot. Plus, my investigator is still trying to find Winwood. So are the police. I can't shake the feeling that this whole thing hangs on him."

"Any leads?" I ask hopefully.

His somber expression as he shakes his head says it all. "I'm running out of time, Tamsyn. The walls are closing in."

This scares me worse than anything else that's happened. Lucien isn't the type to admit defeat or even the possibility of defeat. "Don't say that."

Wry smile. "I haven't given up yet. Like I said, I've been doing some planning. That's what I want to talk to you about. It involves you so I need to bring you up to speed. I know how you feel about me doing things behind your back. Please note that I've learned my lesson on that count."

"Noted," I say. "You get full marks for being a changed man."

"Thank God."

"So...?"

“I changed my will,” he says quietly. “You’re my sole heir.”

I sit there in a stunned silence while this information tries to penetrate my brain. Whatever I’d expected, it wasn’t that. “What? Why would you do that? You’re not going to die, Lucien.”

A muscle pulses in the back of his jaw as though he’s clenching his teeth. “If I get arrested, anything goes in jail.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:24 am

My overwrought brain immediately fills with nightmare images of Lucien being cornered in the shower or ganged up on while playing basketball or some such. My blood turns to ice. “But you said your lawyers would protect you,” I say, fear making my voice pitch higher. “You said you were paying them a lot of money to keep you out of jail.”

He holds up a hand to calm me down, but it’s too late for that. “I’m not going to some cushy federal jail. I’ll be in a local facility where a man with my money will be a target. I need to face facts.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Listen, Tamsyn,” he says with new urgency, taking my hand for a tight squeeze. “I want you to have it. Everything I have is yours.”

“I don’t need it,” I cry. I shake my head and keep shaking it. I’m rejecting the money, yeah, but mostly I’m rejecting the idea of Lucien dying. Ever. “The money belongs to Roman. He’s your family. I know you always worry about me not having money, but I don’t need it. I’m a nurse now. I’ll have a great salary when I start my job in the fall.”

A glimmer of amusement. “I knew you’d say that. But if I ran a contest of who doesn’t need the money the most, let’s go ahead and declare Roman the winner. I’m leaving him my share of Ackerley, but you get everything else.”

“But what about a charity?—”

“It’s done, Tamsyn,” he says with awful finality.

I pull free and run my hands through my hair, reeling from this unspeakable generosity and my sudden reversal of fortune. He’s leaving me billions of dollars. Just like that. And there are things I know I could do with money like that. Charities for children, animals or, I don’t know, research for rare cancers. Hell, I could start my own charity. But every ounce of my body and soul feels sick at the idea. And I’m still shaking my head. “I don’t want money, Lucien. I want you.”

A sudden glow lights his face as he stares at me. Then he takes my hand again and kisses my palm, his lips lush, warm and unbearably tender. “Don’t misunderstand,” he says when he raises his head. “I’ve got people to help you manage it. And I’m not going without a fight.”

“Good.”

“Brace yourself. There’s more.”

“Oh, God.”

He hesitates. I get the feeling he’s choosing his words with extreme care. “Mrs. Hooper’s brownstone. It’s yours. I bought it for you. You have to know that.”

My jaw drops and stays dropped. My heart, meanwhile, threatens to pound out of my chest wall. This kind of wealth — this kind of generosity — doesn’t compute in my middle-class brain, where I can barely afford my upcoming rental payments of \$2300/month and the most extravagant purchase I’ve ever made for myself is a few random clothing items here and there. “What? I don’t know that! I didn’t think it was for me. If anything, I thought you were buying it as a two-fer.”

“A two-fer?”

“Yes. To add to your real estate portfolio, like you said, and to look good by doing something nice for Mrs. Hooper. So I’d stop hating you so much and give you another chance.”

“Forget all that. I don’t need more real estate. I need peace of mind. If something happens to me, you’ll need a place to live. Especially with Ackerley going to Roman. And if I go to jail, but don’t die, you’ll still need a place —”

“I don’t need a place. I keep telling you, I have an apartment starting in the fall.”

“Nope,” he says, and there’s that unyielding finality again. “You need a permanent home so you never have to wonder where you’ll go next. Ever again in your life. No matter what happens to me. Or to you and me. You’ll have a home for the rest of your life.”

“But —”

“And I’m setting up a trust to generate income for upkeep and taxes. So you’ll never have to worry about that.”

Oh, God. He’s thought of everything. Words hang in the air for several long eternities because I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Who knows what the final cost of all this is. I know it’s nothing to him, but it’s as priceless as all the contents of the Louvre to me. “I can’t accept it, Lucien.”

“Please.” He squeezes my hand again, his voice gruff now. “Do it as a favor to me. I can provide this for you. It’s the one thing I can do for you no matter what happens next. Help me out here. So I can rest easy.”

His gaze holds mine, and it’s all right there. His love for me. His need to protect me no matter what and to make sure I’m taken care of for the rest of my life. His absolute

determination. Worst of all? His raw fear that we'll be robbed of our future together. Or that I'll rob him of his peace of mind by saying no.

"No one's ever been this generous with me before," I say, getting choked up at the end.

A strangled laugh. "Good. If some other man had given you a house, I'd have to find him and kill him. And then I would go to jail."

We grin at each other. None of this is a laughing matter, but it's enough to break the tension.

"I'm trying to imagine Mrs. Hooper's face when she finds out that I'm the proud new owner of her house," I say.

More grinning. Until his phone buzzes. He whips it out of his pocket and frowns at the display. "This is the doctor calling me back," he says, standing and striding away. "Sorry. I'll be right back."

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“Go. I understand.”

He heads to the far corner of the room, leaving me to daydream about my sudden home ownership. How does this work? Do I need a plumber now? An electrician? What about furniture? Maybe I should rent it out as an Air B & B and or some such?—

Lucien comes back, his face thunderous as he resumes his seat. “Bad news.”

I’m at the point where I don’t even wait for dread to flood my body. It’s just all dread, all the time. “What now?”

He roughly rubs his hands over the top of his head, spiking his hair again. “The doctor says the police subpoenaed him, so he talked to them earlier today. Told them what Ravenna told him. Which was that she was afraid of me.” His lips twist. “That I’d hit her before and she was afraid I’d hurt her again. She told him that was why she didn’t want him sharing her medical records with me.”

Sudden outrage threatens to gag me. “Oh, my God. You need to call your lawyer right now and let him know so he can —”

He cuts me off by making an impatient sound and reaching for my hand again. “Marry me.”

My heart stops. In a night full of shockers, this is the absolute cherry on top. “What?”

“We could fly to Vegas tonight and do it.”

“But... You’re not allowed to travel, Lucien. The police told you not to go anywhere.”

And I don’t give a fuck shrug. “Better to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

“But... Why?”

He gives me a swift look of adoration. “Because I want you to be my wife. And I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be a free man. This may be our only chance to do it.”

“Don’t say that.” Rising panic makes my voice shrill. “Even if you get arrested, you’ll get bail. Your lawyers won’t let you stay in jail. You’ve been telling me that this whole time.”

“I’m not counting on that,” he says grimly. “I’m a flight risk with my resources. The money. The jet. The yacht. The overseas homes. I’m hopeful, but bail may be a long shot for me.”

God, I feel shaky. It’s a good thing I’m already sitting down. My trembling knees would never carry my body weight right now. This is all too head-spinning to absorb. “You want to marry me?”

There’s that adoration again. “I want you to be my wife. Bottom line. But ...” He sobers. Drops his gaze and clears his throat. “Full disclosure. There’s another reason for us to get married.”

I feel cold suddenly. Wooden. “What is it?”

“If we’re married, you’ll never have to testify against me.”

I blink, my heart lurching. So there it is. His ulterior motive. He doesn’t want to

marry me just for me. I should have known that things with Lucien would always be more complicated than that. “I see.”

“Don’t look at me like that.” He leans in to nail me between the eyes with all his smoldering intensity. “Everything I just said about wanting to marry you is true. But you are a witness. The police will call you to testify against me.”

“Because you threatened Ravenna the night you kicked her out, you mean?”

“That. And everything else that happened that night. How angry I was that she tried to impersonate you with your perfume so she could seduce me.”

“Right,” I say dully. “And all of that gives you more of a motive to kill her.”

He gives me a sharp look, eyes narrowing. “What the fuck?” he says, and there’s no hiding his dismay. “You do think I killed her. This is why you said I only had ninety-eight percent of your trust the other day. You think me wanting to marry you is another manipulation.”

“No,” I say, but it’s halfhearted at best. We both know it. “We still haven’t known each other that long yet, Lucien. This is all such a whirlwind.”

A disbelieving look. “Ms. Scott. Our entire relationship has been a whirlwind. Why should our marriage be any different?”

“I don’t know,” I say helplessly. “I don’t know what to do.”

His expression softens. He reaches into his other pocket and produces — oh, God, it’s a black velvet ring box.

“What are you doing with that?” I cry.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:24 am

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’ve been walking around with it since you came back to Ackerley. I was always going ask you. It was only a matter of time.”

And he opens the box with a tiny creak, revealing an emerald cut diamond with baguettes that look so perfectly clear, it’s like a spectacular ice cube. “It was my mother’s,” he says softly.

I press a hand to my heart, undone. You can’t tell me that he didn’t steal that thing from Mariah Carey’s safe. “I can’t wear a ring likethat,” I say. “It’s too much for me.”

“When you’re wrong, you’re wrong, Ms. Scott. It’s nowhere near good enough for you. Sayyes.”

I open my mouth, filled with sudden sweeping joy. I see it all in that moment. Life here at Ackerley with Lucien. Holidays. Travel. Horseback riding. Endless fun. Kids. I feel the sweetest ache in my heart at the thought of Lucien’s kids. But there are also shadows across my heart and Ravenna’s sly voice inside my head. Don’t trust yourself. Your instincts are bad when it comes to him. He will never change. You can’t trust him. He will hurt you in the end. And I know I’ve forgiven him, but I can’t help but remember how brutally and unexpectedly he dumped me. I never saw it coming and never knew what hit me. I open my mouth, wanting to sayyes. But nothing comes out and the excruciating silence goes on forever.

That’s more than enough answer.

Lucien looks stricken as he slowly lowers the ring box. That’s when his phone

buzzes. But we're both locked in on each other, frozen. All through the first buzz...the second buzz...the third...

He finally blinks, snaps out of it, checks the display, curses and hits the button. "What is it, Gray?"

Oh, God. His lawyer. I sit up straighter, praying it's good news?—

"Got it." Lucien listens, his face turning to stone and losing all its color. Then he tosses the phone aside without another word, his gaze flicking back to me. He opens his mouth, but it's operating on a lengthy delay. He clearly doesn't want to tell me what's happened any more than I want to hear it. "The police are on their way to arrest me for Ravenna's murder."

19

Tamsyn

"I just don't see why you can't come back here and stay with me, honey," Mrs. Hooper says in my ear the following afternoon. For roughly the fourth time since this conversation began. "You're always welcome. Don't forget, I promised Lucien I'd always look out for you. Although I'm not sure a promise to someone in jail for murder carries the same weight, to be honest."

I repress a sigh, forcing myself to loosen my grip on my phone. I'm in the solarium, staring out at the driving rain as it hits the bay's roiling waters outside. With the unseasonable chill and the crypt like gray skies above, the weather perfectly matches my mood: they're both shit.

Honestly, I'm not sure why I don't take Mrs. Hooper up on her offer. Today is the staff's regular day off, which means that the house is like a library after closing. The

long morning has turned into an endless afternoon while I wait for news from Lucien's arraignment. Daniel went to pick him up from the courthouse out of an abundance of optimism. I just pray he doesn't have to spend another night in jail, but he's at the mercy of when the judge holds these hearings. Still, Lucien's lawyer remains confident, so that's a good sign. But I've spent the last several hours with a tight throat and chest, feeling like I won't breathe again until Lucien comes back to Ackerley.

"Tamsyn? You still with me?" Mrs. Hooper says.

"I'm still with you." I force myself to infuse my voice with what I hope is enough energy to allay her fears. "And there's no point in me coming back to you when you have the paparazzi back because of Lucien's arrest, right?"

"Well, you've got me there," she says. "This would almost be a great adventure to brag about to my friends. If this weren't so serious. Murder. I couldn't believe it when I saw his mug shot on the news last night. I just don't want to believe it of him, honey."

I wince at the memory of said mug shot of Lucien glowering at the camera. Haughty. Proud. Humiliated, even if I'm the only one who can see it. As for what happened to his company's stock once the news broke, I don't want to think about it. I just want him back home with me. "But...?"

Mrs. Hooper hesitates. "None of this looks good for him. And I'm worried for you."

Like I need a reminder. I suddenly find myself all out of energy to continue this conversation. "Lucien didn't do it. And he's got the money for the best lawyers in the world, so I have faith that he'll be proved innocent. One way or the other. You should, too."

“Honey, I didn’t mean —”

“Gotta go, Mrs. Hooper. Lucien should be home soon. Hopefully. I’ll stay in touch. Bye.”

She starts to sputter a protest, but I hang up before she can get it out. Then I find myself alone with my racing thoughts, gloomy weather and the echoing emptiness inside the house. If ever there was a time or reason to have a pet, this is it. I could use a dog or cat to keep me company right now. Hell, I’d even take a visit from Juniper, Mrs. Hooper’s annoying Yorkie. Anything to reassure me that I’m not the last living creature on earth.

But it’s just me here right now. Even Roman is gone today, off in the city for some urgent company meeting to reassure the panicked investors. So I’d better do something to pass the time before I crawl out of my skin. I scan through my options. A snack is out because I’m not hungry and I doubt I could keep it down anyway. But a cup of tea might be nice. Tea always cheers people up.

Great. I have a plan.

I get up and make the long trek back to the foyer on my way to the kitchen. But as soon as I hit the base of the curved staircase, all the fine hairs on the nape of my neck begin to prickle. I don’t know what it is, but the air feels chilly and something’s not right. I stop and look around, my heart now thumping hard in my chest. It thumps harder when I catch a whiff of that oriental scent lingering in the air. Not Ravenna’s scent, I remind myself, my skin crawling now. She’s not here. She’ll never be here again. If anything, I need to check for earthly human threats. Not ghostly ones. So I take a deep breath and look around. Nothing seems out of place at first glance. I ease down with a relieved sigh, telling myself that the unrelenting gloom is playing tricks on me. A smarter person would click on a few lamps and be done with it?—

Hang on. There are drops of water all over the floor in front of the front door, as though someone has crept in and brought the rain with them. And that's when I notice it: the waft of fresh air that smells of rain, cut grass and mud. The kind of scent that doesn't belong inside the house.

Unless someone just came in.

Oh, shit.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:25 am

“Is someone there?” I call with the kind of confidence that I don’t remotely feel.
“Hello?”

My voice echoes. No one answers. I stand there for a beat or two, feeling ridiculous and wondering what the hell I should do now. I’ve almost convinced myself that I’m imagining things.

Until a shadow detaches itself from the grandfather clock and materializes into a tall man—someone whose grim face I recognize.

“Winwood?” I gasp. Sudden terror wraps me in a stranglehold, but this is no time to lose my head and act like some idiotic teenager from a horror movie. I cry out, lunging sideways for one of the heavy brass candlesticks on the console —

Unfortunately, he’s way faster than me. He crosses the distance between us, wrenches my wrist away from the candlestick and cranks my arm behind me while using his free hand to clamp me around the waist. The next thing I know, he’s hefting me off my feet, while I furiously kick at thin air.

“Don’t hit me, Tamsyn.”

“Put me down!” I shriek. “I’m going to scream!”

“Go ahead,” he says, sounding supremely unbothered. “I know it’s the staff’s day off. Stop kicking. I’m not going to hurt you.”

But this reminder that I’m here alone with him does nothing to diminish my fear. “Put

me down!”

“I’m going to. But don’t try to hurt me. Or run. That will only end badly for you. Okay?”

I take a deep breath. “Okay.”

I don’t mean it, of course. My brain is already cobbling together a plan to sprint to the nearest powder room and lock myself in while calling 911. But when he sets me down on my feet, he snatches my phone out of my back pocket before letting me go, sending my brilliant plan up in smoke. I pivot to face him, my fury at being manhandled, disarmed, and de-phoned like that battling with my stark terror. I want to hit him, but I don’t dare. He’s tall and muscular, for one thing, way bigger than me and almost as big as Lucien. Plus, he’s wearing a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes and looks like a low-key G. I. Joe with his black T-shirt, khaki cargo pants and hiking boots. And the cherry on top of this nightmare milkshake? The pistol he’s got strapped to a holster under his arm.

“I’m here to help, Lucien,” he says keeping a wary eye on me. “Where is he?”

I hesitate, not wanting to reveal that Lucien is also not here.

“One second,” he says, frowning. “He didn’t make bail?”

“He’s at the arraignment right now,” I say with all the bravado I can muster. “I expect him back any second.”

“Good. I need to talk to him. “

“How did you get on the property, anyway?” I say, beginning to recover. “Lucien has all kinds of beefed-up security.”

A flicker of amusement crosses his expression. “I designed the security system here, ma’am. I know how to create a blind spot when I need to.”

That ain’t good. And that means...wait, does that mean he’s the accomplice who let Ravenna onto the property to set fire to the guest cottage the night she tried to kill me? Of course it does. I long to hurl the accusation in his face—to try to hit him again—but I don’t dare risk escalating the situation by making him angry. My only job is to stay alive and cool headed long enough for help to come. No matter how freaking scared I am.

“Where have you been?” I demand. “The police have been looking for you.”

He hesitates. “That’s confidential information. Let’s just say that I found a nice vacation home nearby. With Wi-Fi. It was unoccupied.”

Of course he did. I remember what Lucien said about Winwood’s extensive military training. He was with some elite team or other. He probably knows how to use a shoelace and some tinfoil to make a satellite dish. “Why did you run off?”

He scowls. “Because Ravenna’s autopsy will show my DNA. But I’m not going to prison for a crime I didn’t commit.”

“Okay, but why not stay here and tell the police you didn’t do it? That’s what a normal innocent person would do.”

“That was my plan. Until I reviewed the security tapes and realized they’d been doctored.”

“What? Doctored?”

Yes,” he says grimly. “So I had to take matters into my own hands and borrow them

—”

“Steal them, you mean,” I say like an idiot, forgetting all about the need to stay calm and nonconfrontational.

“— To recover the lost footage.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:25 am

Now he's got my interest. "Did you find anything?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What?"

"I'll show you."

He heads to the study without another word, clicking on the lights and then the TV. Then he pulls out his phone and hits a few buttons. Black-and-white night vision footage of the back gate at Ackerley pops up on the screen.

"This is from the night of the fire," he says.

"Yeah. I see the time stamp."

We watch. Nothing happens for a minute or two. But then two cars come into view, headlights blazing. One is Ravenna's Jaguar. The other is a dark sedan with a spoiler on the back. A Camry or an Accord. The gate swings open. Then the Jaguar zooms in and parks behind a large tree while the gate swings shut again. Ravenna gets out of the Jaguar.

Daniel gets out of the sedan.

"Oh, my God. Daniel?" I cry.

"Daniel," he says with grim finality.

I watched, stunned, as Daniel hurries over to Ravenna and swoops in for a hug that lifts her to her tippy toes. It does not look like the standard greeting of a member of staff for his former employer. Let's just say that. Ravenna pulls back and lightly smacks his upper arms to get him to drop her. Her back is to us, and there's no sound anyway, but whatever she says to him makes Daniel's shoulders slump. Then she says something else and starts to walk off. He catches her arm and swings her back around before she can get very far. Whereupon she puts her hands on her hips, hikes up her chin and lets him have it for several seconds. He says something harsh back. A standoff ensues. Then she seems to reconsider her position, whatever it is, and she sidles closer. She tips up her chin again, but this time, there's something coquettish about it, with a hair toss and silent body language that's overtly sexual now. Daniel reaches for her again and she allows him to kiss her. There's something desperate about him as he puts his hands on her head and pulls her closer. Something pathetic. Especially once I notice the way she strains away the whole time. Not at all the enthusiastic reception she gave Winwood when they kissed. Then she breaks the kiss and runs off toward the cottage with him staring longingly after her. That seems to be the end of the video.

"All that was missing from the original footage," Winwood says. "I was able to recover it."

I shake my head and start to say something about how I can't believe that Daniel was involved with Ravenna, but my attention snags on Daniel's car. I frown at its frozen image on the screen. "Wait. I've seen that car before somewhere," I say, more to myself than to Winwood.

"You have? You've probably seen it on the grounds here somewhere."

"No. I've never seen him in a car. Or where the staff park," I say faintly, straining hard to remember where I have seen that car with the spoiler. And then I do. "Wait." I glance around for Lucien's tablet and luckily find it right on his desk. In another

stroke of luck, he let me use it one night in his cabin on the cruise when I couldn't sleep, which means I know the password. I punch it in and quickly find what I'm looking for.

"What is it?" Winwood says, coming to stand over my shoulder.

"It's the security footage from the gas station near the beach on the night Ravenna died," I say. "The police think it shows Lucien on his way to the beach to kill her. Lucien showed it to me the other day. Wait. Here he comes."

We watch and wait as a Range Rover zooms into and out of view. And then... Did I imagine it all? No. Another car comes into view and there it is: a dark sedan with a sporty spoiler, also heading in the direction of the beach.

Daniel's car, I now realize.

"Nice work, Nancy Drew," Winwood says, brows up.

"Wait," I say as another memory shakes itself loose from the back of my brain and demands that I pay attention to it. "There's more. Stay here. I'll be right back."

With that, I dash out and hurry upstairs to Ravenna's room, praying the whole way that Maddie didn't finish with her project and sell all of Ravenna's clothes already. But no. There are still plenty of items on the racks. I hurry to the red tweed dress from a charity thing here at Ackerley and look at its corresponding Polaroid to make sure I'm remembering correctly.

And there it is. A picture from three years ago, well before Ravenna's "death." Ravenna posing and pouting at the camera and Daniel on her left, staring at her with the kind of frustrated naked heat that I'm astonished I didn't notice before. I grab it and hurry back downstairs, determined not to let anything happen to this valuable

piece of evidence. Because here in my hot little hand, I have proof that Daniel has long-standing feelings for Ravenna.

The kind of feelings that might drive a man to help a woman fake her own death.

“I found it,” I call, waving it around as I walk back into the study. “It’s a picture of Daniel looking at Ravenna like he wants to fuck her brains out. From three years ago—oh, my God.”

I stop cold, the rest of the sentence drying up in my throat. Because the man I’m talking to in the center of the room isn’t Winwood.

It’s Daniel.

But this is an altered Daniel. One with no hint of the warmth I’ve always received from him. And when he stretches his lips in a bastardization of a smile that doesn’t come anywhere near his flat eyes, it’s a chilling sight. One that makes me realize I’m in real trouble. Not at all like the trouble I thought I was in a few minutes ago when Winwood surprised me.

“What an interesting theory, Tamsyn,” he says softly, malice in every syllable.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:25 am

“Where’s Winwood?” I ask, the only thing I can think of to say.

He tips his head toward the side of the desk. “Over there. He had a little mishap.”

I don’t want to look. But I force myself, turning my head slowly so I have time to brace myself. And what do I see? Winwood stretched out on his back, eyes closed with a widening pool of red behind his head and a bloodstained paperweight nearby on the floor.

Then I hear something that terrifies me and thrills me. Lucien’s voice calling from the hallway. “Tamsyn? Is that you?”

I want to shout a warning. Tell him to run. To save himself. To call the police. Something. But there’s no time and it’s already too late. Lucien appears in the doorway, grinning at the sight of me. Until he sees the look on my face and all his pleasure dies. “What’s wrong?”

Daniel answers for me, gesturing at the floor. “You’re just in time, Lucien. Winwood had a little accident.” I watch in absolute horror as Daniel reaches behind his back and withdraws Winwood’s pistol, which he’d evidently tucked into his waistband. He clicks off the safety, then pumps a round into the chamber before casually lowering it to his side and focusing on us. “So careless of him to drop his pistol, don’t you think?”

All the color leeches from Lucien's face as he swiftly scans the scene, his expression cycling through disbelief, sudden comprehension and veiled alarm. Anger comes last. His attention lingers on Winwood, the gun and the distance between me and each of them. Then he flashes a warning look at me—Do nothing; let me handle this—and reins in his temper as he faces Daniel. I see the effort it takes for Lucien to control his rage in the straining cords of his neck as he swallows hard and in the muscle that pulses in his temple.

“What's going on here, Daniel?” he says, his voice perfectly calm. Perfectly reasonable.

“We're having a discussion, Lucien.” Daniel matches his tone, but there's a hint of a nasty smile hovering around his mouth. Of triumph. “We're clearing a few things up. Evidently, Winwood reappeared with some theories that he was happy to share with Tamsyn. I happened to overhear the tail end of their theories. Now here we are.”

“Okay,” Lucien says. “What happened to Winwood? You skipped over that part.”

Daniel shoots a disinterested glance at Winwood. “I decided it was best if I neutralized Winwood before he caused me any more problems. He's not the kind of guy you want coming after you.”

“Indeed,” says Lucien. “You seem like a man with a lot on your mind. I'm back now. Why don't we let Tamsyn go and you and I can talk and clear things up.”

A brief sneer from Daniel. “This is the problem with you, Lucien. You think you're the Lord of the Universe, but you're not. There is now. You're not in charge of the situation. I am. Let's get that straight.”

“Fine,” Lucien says with an easy shrug. “Why don't you let Tamsyn go.” He pauses. “Please.”

A hearty laugh from Daniel. “Full marks for manners. But Tamsyn’s not going anywhere. I have the feeling you’ll be much more cooperative while she’s in the room. No one quite holds your attention like Tamsyn does, do they? Not even your late wife.”

Lucien’s mouth twists. I get the feeling he’s waging another epic battle with his temper. “You want to talk? Let’s talk. Why don’t you bring me up to speed?”

Daniel looks at me. There’s no humanity in his expression. He’s at absolute zero. The realization makes my stomach clench with fear. “Why don’t you start, Tamsyn. Tell Lucien why Winwood showed up tonight. I wasn’t here for that part.”

I take a deep breath, but my voice still shakes. “Winwood admitted to having sex with Ravenna the night you kicked her out of Ackerley. He’d planned to review the security tapes to see what they revealed about her activities, then hand them over to the police. But when he realized the tapes had been doctored, he stole them and disappeared because he didn’t want to take the fall for murdering Ravenna. He’s been hiding in a neighbor’s house nearby while he recovered the lost footage.” I pause, shooting a wary glance at Daniel. I don’t want to piss him off with this recitation. He’s clearly capable of things I never imagined. But he’s watching me with all the patience in the world. So I continue. “The missing footage showed that Daniel was the one who let Ravenna onto the estate the night of the fire. And it also showed them kissing.”

A bark of derisive laughter from Lucien. “I see.”

“When I saw the footage of Daniel’s car, I realized that I’d seen a car like it before,” I continue. “I saw it on the footage of the gas station from you driving near the beach, the night Ravenna was killed. Daniel’s car also drove in that direction.”

Lucien’s shocked to gaze swings back to Daniel, who raises his shoulders in a what

can you do shrug. Then Lucien looks back at me. “Got it. Anything else?”

“Yes. I found a picture of Ravenna with one of her dresses upstairs. It was from three years ago. Daniel was in the background looking at her as if he wanted to swallow her whole.” Some wicked impulse prompts me to poke the bear. Just a little. “But it didn’t seem like Ravenna noticed him at all.”

Daniel’s mouth spasms. “There you go, Lucien. You’re up to speed.”

Lucien stares at him long and hard, making no attempt to hide his dawning horror. “Is this true?”

Daniel widens his stance, tapping the gun against his thigh, his finger on the trigger. “That I loved your wife? Yes.”

A wave of revulsion knocks the shock off Lucien’s expression. “Since when?”

“Since the second I saw her when you brought her home to Ackerley,” Daniel replies, and he doesn’t say it so much as he hurls it.

Lucien nods as though he knew it all along. I get the feeling a lot of puzzle pieces are dropping into place for him. I know they are for me. “So you were, what? Having an affair with her? My whole marriage?”

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Daniel's expression sours. "No. We were never intimate."

"Why not?" Lucien says, scoffing. "She fucked everyone else."

I shoot Lucien a warning look. Neither one of us should be taunting Daniel now. No matter how tempting it is. We need to say or do anything we can to stay alive. But neither man is looking at me. They're locked in on each other with mutual malice.

"I was her best friend," Daniel says with the kind of pride you'd expect him to use if the title was Global Superhero or Supreme Emperor of the Universe. "Her closest confidant. I was her person. She told me that. All the time. She didn't want to take the chance of ruining our relationship by making it sexual."

A flash of amusement from Lucien. He quickly represses it, to my great relief. "That must've been tough. With you loving her so much and all."

Daniel nods. He seems too choked up to speak. And I may be wrong, but I think I see a shimmer of tears in his bright blue eyes.

"So... You, what? Helped her fake her own death?" Lucien says.

Daniel clears his throat. Shrugs. "Why not? It wasn't hard to capsize the boat. I helped her get a fake passport. She already had money offshore. It was easy."

"Except the part about me and the police going nuts trying to find her," Lucien says. "Why did she do it? What was her game plan?"

Scathing look from Daniel. “To get the fuck away from you. What else?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Lucien says. “I offered her a fortune to agree to a divorce. She could have gotten the fuck away from me all she wanted.”

A shout of bitter laughter from Daniel. “This is why you never deserved her. Because you never understood her. Not like I did. You didn’t love her for who she was. I did.”

One of Lucien’s brows goes up. “Okay. I’ll bite. What am I not getting?”

“Ravenna didn’t just want to get away from you,” Daniel says, his voice now thick with what sounds like righteous anger. “She wanted to stick it to you. To win. On her terms. She wanted to let you know that you may own the earth, but you didn’t own her. And you don’t own me.”

“I see,” Lucien says, and he seems sad now. “You thought I owned you. I thought we were friends.”

“Friends?” Daniel’s voice booms through the room. “How can you be friends with someone you regard as your inferior?”

Lucien looks stung. “Inferior? We grew up together. You, me and Roman. We did everything together —”

“No. You gave me handouts. And you never let me forget it.”

“Handouts?” Lucien says.

“Do you think I wanted to be reminded that you lived in the big house and I lived in the caretaker’s cottage? You think I wanted to wear your old clothes and ride your horse and swim in your pool? You think I wanted to go to the local public school when you

and Roman went off to boarding school? Or maybe you think it was cool for me to work my ass off and buy my own first car at the age of 20 when your father gave you and Roman BMWs the second you turned sixteen.”

An incoherent sound of outrage from Lucien. “You were part of the family!”

Daniel sneers and lashes out, raising the pistol and connecting it with Lucien’s jaw hard enough to make Lucien’s head whip around and a shot ring out. The sound is nerve shredding, like cannon fire. Plaster explodes from the far wall. Lucien shouts with pain. I shriek, involuntarily reaching for him before a warning look from Daniel freezes me in my spot.

“Never say that again!” Daniel roars, wild-eyed now. Worse, his voice is guttural and chilling, the kind of thing that belongs in a movie about demonic possession.” “Do you understand me?”

Lucien spits blood and swivels his lower jaw back and forth, probably making sure it’s still attached to his body. Then, unbelievably, he checks to make sure I’m okay. How he’s still standing after a blow like that, I’ll never know. I nod. Try to smile. Then he turns to Daniel. “I understand. No need to get excited.”

Daniel’s inner gargoyle and burgeoning insanity slowly retreat until his eyes merely gleam with malice rather than flashing with it. He checks his collar with his free hand. Tugs the bottom of his suit jacket to straighten it out. Clears his throat and bows his head. “Apologies for my bad manners,” he says, and his voice is gruff but otherwise normal again. “Your mother would not appreciate the damage to her wall.”

Lucien starts to smile, then grimaces from the pain and raises a hand to his face. “No worries. It’s been that kind of day.”

“I was not part of the Winter family,” Daniel says, enunciating his words with great

care.“That’s the kind of nonsense the rich tell each other to feel better about themselves. They talk about how well they treat their staff members while they’re always keeping a foot on their necks.”

In a night full of shocking events, this unleashed violence and vitriol from Daniel may be the worst of all. And if it hits me this hard, I’m sure it’s gotta be killing Lucien.

“I see,” Lucien says quietly, looking pale around the livid red mark now blossoming over half his face. “What should I have done for you that I didn’t do, pray tell?”

“You could let me have Ravenna,” Daniel says.

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Lucien sadly shakes his head. “Ravenna was her own person. You don’t know anything about her if you don’t know that. She never did anything in her life that she didn’t want to do. If she didn’t want you...”

“You could have taken better care of her.” Daniel’s voice grows steadily louder. “You could have recognized how special she was. You didn’t treat her like a queen. I would have. If she’d given me the chance.”

“You could’ve tried,” Lucien says, shrugging. “But she was a bottomless pit. Nothing was ever enough. I doubt you would have been. But we’re getting off track. I assume you’re the one who contacted her in New Zealand and told her that I was with Tamsyn? And the two of you decided it was a good time for her resurrection?”

Daniel pauses. “Yes.”

“And you ‘found’ her down on the beach. After picking up from the airport, I assume,” Lucien says.

“Yes.”

“Because if I’d found someone else to be with, that was the perfect time for her to come back and stick it to me again, right?”

“Yes.”

I want to know something,” I say. I stood quietly for as long as I could, but now I have a serious question. “She turned up with a concussion. How did she get that?”

Daniel stares at me. “She did it to herself.”

“What?” Lucien and I both say.

“She wanted me to do it,” Daniel says. “I refused. I wasn’t going to hurt her. So she found a rock. Hit herself on the head. The rest is history.”

Lucien and I exchange an astonished look. If we ever needed additional evidence of how psychopathic Ravenna was, this is surely it.

“I still don’t get it,” Lucien says. “What was her game plan?”

Bitter laugh from Daniel. “Funny you should ask. Ravenna’s game plans were like the weather. You get something else every couple of days or so. Withyou? She wanted to win. To ruin you however she could. To make sure you didn’t live happily ever after with some other woman. Withme? She pretended that her game plan was to come back and finally get a divorce. Get as much money from you as possible. So that she and I could finally be together.”

Lucien can’t hold back a startled laugh. “You believed that? I’m sure she wanted to ruin me if all else failed. But she was scheming hard to get back with me the whole time she was here.”

Daniel’s ugly smile stretches. “That became evident.”

“So she strung you along,” Lucien says. “I’m not surprised. She was good at that. Until...?”

Daniel’s expression closes off. His eyes go flat again. Dead. It’s like someone siphoned a man’s soul from his body. “Until the night I met her on the beach to confront her about setting the fire.”

“Wait,” Lucien says. “Where did she go when she disappeared after the fire and the police were looking for her?”

“She stayed in the house my grandmother left me when she died last year. It’s about ten minutes away,” Daniel says. “We used burner phones.”

Lucien seems startled. “I didn’t know you had a grandmother nearby. Or that she’d died.”

Daniel shoots him a scathing look. “So much for me being like family, eh?”

Lucien’s face floods with color.

“Shall I continue?” Daniel says. “I had no idea Ravenna was going to try to kill Tamsyn when I let her back onto the estate. I thought she just wanted to talk to you. Anyway, that night on the beach, I pressed her about when she and I were finally going to be together.”

“And...?” Lucien prompts.

“And she laughed at me. Laughed.”

Daniel’s face crumples. He suddenly seems so bewildered and looks so heartsick. Ravenna took his mind and well and truly fucked it. Under other circumstances, I’d probably feel sorry for this man who wasted years of his life worshiping a woman who turned out to be a monster. But now I find myself experiencing a perverse feeling of satisfaction. This ungrateful SOB thought he could smile in Lucien’s face, stab him in the back by running off with his wife and live happily ever after? Only to realize, far too late, that Ravenna made a fool of him? Good. It’s a pleasure to see the scales fall from his eyes. This is exactly what he deserves.

“What happened then?” Lucien says.

Daniel shakes his head, his unfocused gaze resting on the floor as he absently taps the pistol against his thigh. “She told me she’d fucked Winwood. And that I was the last man on earth she’d ever have sex with.Me.” He uses the gun to tap his chest, looking more and more unhinged. “After she told me I was the best friend she’d ever had. After she promised we’d betogether.”

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Lucien reaches out, his attention centered on the gun. “Daniel. Give me the gun.”

“She told me I disgusted her,” Daniel says. “She said she screamed and came over and over again when Winwood fucked her. She said the two of them laughed at me.” Daniel can barely get the words out. “She. Broke. My. Heart.”

“That sounds like Ravenna,” Lucien says. “So that’s why you killed her.”

Daniel frowns, looking startled by the suggestion. “I never wanted to hurt her.”

“But you did.” Lucien’s voice is quiet but firm. “You picked up a rock and bashed her on the back of the head. Didn’t you, Daniel?”

Daniel shakes his head, using both his free hand and his gun hand to press the sides of his head. “She was still laughing when she turned her back on me and walked away. She said she was going to use her fake passport and go to Bali. She said she hoped she never laid eyes on me again.”

“So you killed her,” Lucien says.

“I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to stop her laughing. I couldn’t stand the sound.” Daniel lowers his hands and stares down at them, looking bewildered. “But then there was blood. A lot of blood.”

“Where?” Lucien asks sharply.

“On my hands.” Daniel blinks several times, nostrils flaring. “On a rock.”

“And Ravenna...?” Lucien says.

“She was ...she was face down on the stand.” Daniel now has his fingers flexed as though he’s holding the rock in question. “And her head was smashed in somehow.”

Lucien scoffs. “Notsomehow. It was smashed in because you killed her.”

A chilling half smile from Daniel. “It was smashed in because she deserved it. She won’t laugh at me again.” His satisfaction slowly fades away to bleak nothingness. “It’s her own fault. She pushed me too far. She knew how much I loved her.”

I stand there watching this whole exchange, frozen with revulsion. I’d thought I’d learned all about the face of madness the night Lucien kicked Ravenna out and she glared at me with evil intent behind those livid eyes. But this. It’s another master class on insanity.

“Thank you for telling us,” Lucien says. “Now you’ve got to tell the police. We’ve got to straighten this out.”

Daniel’s head snaps up, and there’s nothing teary or heartbroken about his gaze now as he levels it on Lucien. Just pure hatred. “Why would I do that? So you can win again? So you can live happily ever after with your little empty doll and your billions while I rot in prison for the rest of my life?”

“Because it’s the truth. Because the police will figure it out eventually.”

“Will they?” Daniel says, his attention shifting to me. It wasn’t a thrill to hear him call me a pretty little empty doll, but it was much better than the raw malevolence in his narrowed gaze now. “You should have stayed away, little doll. I warned you that it wasn’t safe here. Didn’t I?”

“Leave her alone, Daniel.” Lucien’s voice sounds rougher and less controlled now as he edges closer to me. “Deal with me. I’m the one you have a problem with. Not Tamsyn.”

Daniel laughs, the sound harsh and ugly. “Oh, I have a problem with you, Tamsyn, and Winwood. I have enough problems to go around. More than enough. My biggest problem is deciding which of you I want to kill first.”

“You don’t need to kill anyone, Daniel.” I try to smile. Try to keep my voice audible. Try to make it sound as though he’s got a way out when we all know he doesn’t. “You’ll only make things worse for yourself if you hurt anyone else when you don’t need to. And Lucien will let you go, won’t he, Lucien? You can take one of his cars and go.”

“Absolutely,” Lucien says, still easing closer to me.

Another laugh from Daniel. It sounds like a bark of hysteria. “Go where?” He gesticulates with the gun. “Do what? With what money?”

“I’m happy to give you money, Daniel,” Lucien says. “Whatever you need.”

“I need Ravenna back. But since your money can’t do that for me, I need to put myself out of this misery,” Daniel says, his face spasming as he taps the barrel to his temple.

Oh, God. I exchange a swift look with Lucien, heart stopping and blood running cold.

“Slow down,” Lucien says. “We can figure this out. No one else needs to get hurt.”

Daniel stares at him for the longest several beats of my life. “I disagree,” he says, now pointing the pistol at Lucien, who raises his hands.

“No!” I scream. I step sideways, determined to shield Lucien.

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“Stupid doll,” Daniel says, swinging the gun around and aiming it directly at my torso. “I’m happy to take care of you first.”

I don’t know what happens next. There’s a flurry of movement. A shout. A shot. A grunt of pain. All of it happens together. And then I’m landing on my back on the floor with a hard thud, a wild-eyed Lucien on top of me. I hit my head hard, so I’m a little dazed as Lucien withdraws. I rub my eyes and try to sit up when a war cry rings out. I get my eyes focused enough to see Lucien spring from his crouch next to me just as Daniel raises the gun again.

“No!” I yell again as another shot rings out.

Lucien connects with Daniel, catching him around the waist and knocking him to the floor. Daniel tries to raise the gun again, but Lucien is too quick for him, catching his wrist and repeatedly slamming his hand against the floor, forcing Daniel to drop the gun. By now, Lucien has straddled him and lets loose with a flurry of punches to his face. Once again, Daniel is too slow and can’t get his hands up fast enough. Lucien lands blow after blow in an endless volley of hits that would put vintage Iron Mike Tyson to shame.

“Don’t you touch her,” Lucien bellows between blows. “Don’t you ever fucking touch her!”

I recover enough of my wits to lever up to all fours and scramble for the loose gun. Meanwhile, there’s other activity in the room.

“Lucien.” The craggy new voice startles me. I glance around and discover, to my

joyous relief, Winwood conscious and on his feet, staggering over to Lucien and trying to intervene.

But Lucien isn't done. "Don't you ever touch her!"

"Lucien." Winwood catches Lucien around the waist and hauls him to his feet and off Daniel, whose pulverized face now resembles several pounds of raw hamburger. "Stop."

"Here's the gun," I say, hastily standing and passing it to Lucien, who seems to be coming out of his murderous rage.

But there's no need for the gun now. Daniel groans and rolls onto his side, but he's clearly down for the count. I don't think he's going anywhere.

"You're alive," I say to Winwood, who's gingerly rubbing the back of his head.

"Barely," Winwood says with a fleeting smile.

"You okay?" Lucien sets the gun on his desk and reaches for me, his hands rough and urgent as he grabs me by the arm and pulls me in for a thorough once over. "He didn't hurt you? You're not shot?"

"No," I say, laughing with relief. "I banged my head, but I'm okay."

A smile of blinding joy from Lucien. "Good," he says, pulling me in for a hard kiss.

"Are you okay?" I say, when he lets me up for air.

That's when Lucien starts to look funny. His face, I notice with dawning horror, is the stark white of bleached hospital sheets. He frowns, looking bewildered. "I don't

know.”

Then he sinks to the floor with the dead weight of a two hundred pound bag of grain, slipping right through my outstretched arms as I watch him with utter astonishment.

“Lucien!” I scream, dropping to my knees on one side of him while Winwood drops on his other side. I go straight into nurse mode, noting his glazed gaze fixed on the ceiling and —oh, God— the widening circle of blood ruining the starched perfection of his white dress shirt low on his abdomen.

“What is it?” Lucien says, his voice thready now.

“You got shot,” I say, trying to sound upbeat about it. “Can you roll to the side for me? I need to see the back. Winwood, call 911. Now. Wait, no. Toss me that throw from the sofa first. Thanks.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Winwood says, hurrying off.

Lucien manages to roll on his side, and I do a quick assessment, noting the small exit wound in back.

“Is it bad?” Lucien asks.

“Nope.” I settle him on his back again and throw the blanket over his wound, then lean into it, pressing hard with my palms to slow down the bleeding. He groans with pain. “It’s through and through. You’ll be just fine. I’ve seen worse.”

“I don’t know,” he says, sounding loopy now, his eyes rolling back. “It feels pretty bad to me.”

That gets a smile out of me. “I’m sure it does,” I say, kissing his forehead. “Sorry

about that. But don't you dare pass out on me."

"Why not?" he says, his voice now fainter than ever.

"Remember when you asked me to marry you?"

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He manages to raise his heavy lids. “Yeah?”

“The answer is yes. And don’t give me any bullshit about withdrawing the question.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, and we share a fleeting smile before his eyes roll closed again. “Pocket.”

“What?” I say.

“The ring. In my pocket.”

“You’re still carrying that around?”

“Put it on. My mother’s diamond studs are in there, too,” he says, as commanding as ever as he passes out.

21

Lucien

I submit with rising impatience as the nurse bustles around me, checking my bandages, my IV line and my pulse to make sure I still have one. I’m still feeling a little groggy after my surgery, plus the police debriefing did nothing to put the wind back in my sails. I’m eager to spend some time alone with Tamsyn, but she’s across the room in my private suite here at the hospital, talking to Mrs. Hooper on the phone and the nurse is now checking — for fuck’s sake — my blood oxygen level.

Then the worst possible thing happens. There's a knock on the door and Detective Smith pokes her head inside. "Can I get a quick word, Mr. Winter?"

"In addition to the quick word you and your team already had?" I say, my voice still sounding craggy after the anesthesia.

"It won't take long," she says.

Sighing, I wave her inside.

"I'll get out of your hair," the nurse says cheerily, grabbing her little cart and heading for the door. "Give a shout if you need anything."

"Thanks. Will do," I say.

"Detective Smith," Tamsyn says, hanging up and coming over to join us.

"Ms. Scott. I'm glad you're here, too," Detective Smith says. "You'll be happy to know I've been on the phone with the prosecutor's office. They'll contact your lawyer directly, but they're dropping all charges against you and issuing a statement that due to the receipt of additional information, they now believe you had nothing to do with your wife's death. Daniel will be charged as soon as he's released. We've got a guard on him until then."

"Oh, thank God," Tamsyn says. "That means your company will bounce back, right, Lucien?"

"Yeah," I say. Good news all around. But I feel strangely hollow. "How's Winwood? The nurses won't tell us anything because of privacy issues."

"He's good," Detective Smith says. "I was down in his room a little while ago. "He's

got a concussion, but they'll probably let him go tomorrow."

I give her a pointed look. "I hope no one in your department is thinking about charging him with anything."

There's a pause.

"While we don't love it when witnesses take off with crucial evidence, we don't see any benefit to pursuing charges against Winwood at this time."

Tamsyn and I exchange a swift look of relief.

"Good," Tamsyn says.

"Mr. Winter," Detective Smith says, picking her words with the care of a soldier tiptoeing through a minefield on stilts, "I just want to issue my personal regrets for ____"

I wave one of my sore and badly bruised hands to stop her, wincing against the pain. I wouldn't have been so merciless with Daniel's face if I'd known how much it would hurt me. To my surprise, I don't want or need to hear her apology. "Forget it. You were doing your job. I know I looked guilty."

Detective Smith seems startled. "That's very gracious of you."

I take Tamsyn's hand and hold it. "I'm feeling very gracious right now. You know what would make me feel even better?"

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“What’s that?” Detective Smith says.

“For you to call me Lucien.”

A fleeting grin from Detective Smith. “I’m happy to call you, Lucien, Mr. Winter, but it’s my profound hope that the two of us never see each other again. And I’m sure it’s yours.”

“Indeed,” I say, offering my hand.

We shake. She turns to go before glancing at Tamsyn. “Is that new hardware I see on your ring finger, Ms. Scott? I never miss a sparkler.”

“It is,” Tamsyn says, beaming and holding out her hand to show off the ring.

“Earrings, too, I see. Very nice,” Detective Smith says. “Best wishes to you both.”

“Thanks,” we both say as we watch her leave. Then Tamsyn pulls a chair over to my bed and sits, reaching for my hand again.

“Alone at last,” I say.

“Right? I don’t even know where to begin,” she says.

“Neither do I.”

There’s a pause while we stare at each other, shaking our heads and trying to absorb

everything that's happened since we were last alone together. I don't know about her, but my brain is overflowing with thoughts. I can almost feel them trickling down the sides of my face.

"So?" she finally says. "How was jail? Was the food good? Oh, and Mrs. Hooper wants me to tell you she never doubted your innocence for a single second."

That gets me. I choke on a surprised laugh, breaking off immediately when it makes my side hurt. "Don't make me laugh," I say, wincing.

"Sorry," she says. "And I'm sorry you had to go through that. Being arrested. Spending the night in jail..."

It kills me to see her upset. As does the thought of what I would have been like to spend more than a night as a prisoner. The clanging of the bars. The desolation and utter lack of control over my own life. The stench—of piss, sweat and, most of all, desperation. What if I'd had to stay? What would I have done if my only contact with Tamsyn had been when we put our hands up to either side of the glass? The idea makes me shudder. "Forget it. I have. It's over now."

"But..."

"I'm done with the past. I'm not looking back. Neither should you."

She nods, ducking her head to discreetly wipe away her tears. "I'm sorry I had my doubts about you, Lucien. Most of me knew you'd never hurt Ravenna. But there was this one tiny little corner of my brain that was so scared that maybe you had. I'm ashamed of myself. And I'm sorry. I know that hurt you."

There it is, my second apology in the last ten minutes. Like the first, I discover that I don't need to hear it. Tonight is a time for fresh starts and moving forward. I'm not

going to let anything stand in the way of that. Not even my wounded pride. “It’s okay. I swear. I don’t blame you. Being in Ravenna’s orbit was always like being in a fun house with those distortion mirrors. There’s no way to know what’s real and what’s not. She fucked with everyone’s mind she ever met.” I laugh bitterly. “It was her one true gift.”

“No kidding. Look what she did to Daniel. Daniel. Of all people. I never would’ve thought it was him.”

“Neither would I.” I hesitate, then decide to just spit it out. “He was right, though. About me.”

That startles her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I had my head so far up my own ass that I didn’t realize how he felt. About any of it. Maybe it was condescending of me to act like he was part of the family when of course he never could be. I don’t know.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” She smooths the hair at my temple, her hand cool and soothing. “From everything I ever saw, you were extremely fair and generous with him. Your fortune was an accident of birth. The same with his lack of fortune. Neither one of you was to blame about that. He was just jealous and bitter. And if Ravenna was pulling him closer and pushing him away for all those years...” She breaks off, grimacing. “I can only imagine the damage she did to him. I wish we could do some kind of emotional audit. Figure out the ultimate cost of Ravenna’s gaslighting all of us.”

I make a derisive sound. “Incalculable but astronomical.”

We lapse into a thoughtful and dazed silence.

“Is it really over?” she finally says.

“Yes.”

“We’re really getting married?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Her smile is so ridiculously happy — so energizing and healing — that it feels like an infusion of strength directly into my bloodstream. I can almost feel my flesh knitting itself back together as my body recuperates.

That’s when a new urgency hits me. I grab her hands tighter, pulling her closer. “There’s nothing to stop us now. You know that, right? No reason to hold back. Nothing we can’t say to each other.”

“You’re the one who’s been holding yourself back,” she points out.

She’s got me there. “You’re right.” I plow ahead, my soaring heart firmly in charge for once. “You’re right. That’s all over. There’s a lot I want to tell you.”

“Like what?”

“Like I want to park my ass on the sofa with you every night after dinner and watch movies. Like I don’t care whether we live at Ackerley, my penthouse or Mrs. Hooper’s brownstone. None of that matters. I don’t give a fuck. As long as we’re together. And...” I trail off, all this overflowing emotion lodging in my throat and making it hard to get the words out. “We’re going to need some kids. When you’ve got your career up and running and the time is right.”

“Oh, we are definitely going to need some kids.”

“Yeah?” I figured she’d want kids, but this is our first time discussing it. “Good.”

“I love you, Lucien,” she says, eyes shining.

“I love you.”

“I can’t wait to get you back home,” she says with a frown at all my medical apparatus.

“Same.” I rest my head on the pillow, as tired as I am invigorated. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a vacation.”

Epilogue

One Week Later

Lucien

“I have a confession,” Tamsyn says when I join her.

I mirror her posture, leaning my arms on the railing and enjoying the view. The sparkling Mediterranean seems more turquoise than indigo today. No telling what color blue we’ll get tomorrow. Meanwhile, Monte Carlo looks serene and peaceful in the distance. “Do tell.”

She faces me, her sweeping gesture encompassing the yacht, the stewards ushering platters of food to the table for lunch and our teak deck chairs nearby. “I kind of prefer your method of seeing the Côte d’Azur to the whole cruise ship thing.”

I thought she might. I smother a smile. “You sure? We don’t have bingo. Or trivia night.”

“Well, there are drawbacks,” she says gravely. “Plus, I kinda miss Mrs. Hooper and

her crew of old ladies.”

That gets a laugh out of me. “I’m happy to fly them in if you like.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely not.”

We laugh together, another of the fantastic moments between us that come so fast and furious these days. I can never resist touching her, so I reach out and smooth her hair back from where the breeze has blown it into her face, enjoying the way the sunlight hits the honeyed strands. “But if you miss her, I’m happy to have the whole gang out to Ackerley when we get back.”

“Oh, yeah? Juniper, too?”

“I’d never dream of excluding Juniper. He’s a VIP as I recall.”

More laughter.

“So, listen,” she says, looking shy all the sudden. Which is unusual, considering that we wake up most mornings with either my dick in her mouth or my head between her legs. Let’s just say we’re way past shyness with each other. So she’s got my interest. “I have a surprise for you.”

I feel a strange swoop inside. “A surprise? For me?”

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My bafflement seems to amuse her. “Yes. For you.”

“Why?”

She bursts out laughing. “Because I love you and I want to give you something. You give me things all the time.”

I still don’t get it. “So? What’s that got to do with anything?”

More laughter. “Well, it certainly works for me. Getting fabulous jewels and vacations and real estate all the time. But at some point, a little reciprocation seems appropriate. Otherwise, it’s kind of unfair to you. Don’t you think?”

“No. I don’t think,” I say, frowning. “I’ve got everything I need. Every day with you is Christmas. What else is there?”

Her smile manages to be both brighter and more beautiful than any of our spectacular surroundings. “Why so suspicious?” she says as she reaches into one of the folds of her filmy blue sarong.

“I can’t remember the last time anyone surprised me with anything,” I say, the tips of my ears feeling hot now.

“Well, that’s about to change.” She produces a black velvet jewelry box, starts to give it to me, then hesitates. “It’s nothing extravagant,” she says quickly. “I don’t want to get your hopes up.”

If she only knew how hard she's got my heart thumping right now, she'd cut herself a break. "So it's not the keys to a new Bugatti?"

"No," she says, laughing. She opens the box, revealing a heavy ID bracelet with engraving on it. "Like I said, it's not fabulous. It's only sterling silver. But it's very precious to me."

"Why is that?" I asked softly, watching her closely because she seems a little teary.

She pulls the bracelet out of the case and tosses the box onto the nearest lounge chair, then holds it up to show me the engraving. For Big Ralph, it says on one side. We'll miss you, it says on the other.

My heart thumps harder.

"The guys at the shop give this to my father when he sold the shop. They knew he was very sick but he didn't want them to worry. So they all pretended it was a retirement gift. Anyway, I hope you like —"

"I love it." I can't stick my arm out fast enough. "Put it on."

She's all smiles again, laughing and quickly swiping away her tears. The bracelet goes on and we both admire it. Then I pull her in for a hug.

"Thank you," I say, my voice husky now.

"I just wanted my dad to be involved with us a little. You know?"

"I know," I say, letting her go and deciding to confess what I've been up to. "So did I. That's why I asked for his blessing. For our marriage."

"What?" Her jaw drops. "You asked for his blessing? What do you mean?"

“I mean, this is what exposure to you does to me. You’ve got me going to cemeteries and speaking to graves. I was there the day after they discharged me from the hospital. The same day I went to the office. It just seemed like the right thing to do.”

She recovers somewhat, but her brows are still somewhere up near her hairline. “And what did he say?”

I choke back a laugh. I still can’t believe the whole episode myself. “Let’s just say he was disappointingly silent.”

“Sorry about that,” she says, also laughing. “He’s like that.”

I pull her in again, kissing her forehead. “But I got the feeling he was pleased.”

“But not as pleased as I am.” She takes my hand and backs toward our state room. “Do you have a minute before lunch? I can show you how pleased I am.”

I recognize and live for that gleam in her eyes. “For you? I have all the time in the world.”

“I thought you might. Oh, and before I forget— I’ve been meaning to mention that we never found out who told the paparazzi that I was staying with Mrs. Hooper. I don’t know why we didn’t ask Daniel about that when we had the chance. Now we’ll never know.”

I give her a funny look. “Who else would it have been? What made you think about that?”

“I don’t know. I was just thinking about all the stars that had to line up for us to be together. The way we met. The way Mrs. Hooper’s fall allowed me to go to Ackerley with you. The way the paparazzi swarm led me to go back to Ackerley. The way the bullet missed your important organs when you were shot. I know you don’t believe in

fate, but I kind of do.”

“Interesting,” I say, keeping my poker face firmly in place and renewing my resolve never to tell her that I was the one who tipped the paparazzi off about her whereabouts. Why? Because I have contacts in the press and I don’t believe in fate. Never have. So when I saw an opportunity to put some pressure on Tamsyn to come back to Ackerley and me, I took it.

But that can be my little secret. One thing I know about Tamsyn is that she would not appreciate learning about another one of my little interventions on behalf of our relationship.

Smothering a smile, I follow my fiancée to our state room for a little early afternoon delight, thinking that life has turned out to be pretty fucking good. And I don’t plan to rock our boat ever again.

Unless absolutely necessary.