



His Secret Merger

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Description: What happens when your friends-with-benefits becomes your only shot at forever?

Juliette Vanderburg built her life on independence, sharp instincts, and zero entanglements—especially with men like Damian Sinclair. Billionaire. Art philanthropist. Her on-again, off-again distraction with a body made for sin and secrets deeper than the ocean between them.

But when a professional collaboration turns personal—and one impulsive question about IVF changes everything—Juliette finds herself at the crossroads of business, biology, and heartbreak.

Damian never meant to fall for her. He's spent his life avoiding real connection, haunted by a family legacy he swore he'd never repeat. But with Juliette in his arms and her dreams within reach, the man who once walked away from fatherhood might just become the man willing to fight for it.

As reputations unravel and long-buried truths come to light, they'll have to decide: is love just another risk they can't afford... or the one merger that could save them both?

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CHAPTER ONE

Damian

The knock on my door was too soft to be urgent but too purposeful to ignore.

“Come in,” I called, closing the donor spreadsheet in front of me. I’d been staring at it so long that the numbers were beginning to look like abstract art.

Louisa stepped inside, dressed in her usual neutral palette—soft gray slacks, white blouse, and thin gold chain that caught the light. It was just enough to say I have impeccable taste and I’m not trying too hard. She was brilliant like that—sharp without showboating.

I smiled. “If this is about next week’s Provenance Roundtable, tell me you’re canceling it. I need one less thing on fire.”

She gave me a tight smile. “It’s not that.”

Louisa crossed the room with the kind of grace that came from years as the University of Miami’s art curator and a storied career researching in Europe’s glass-walled museums, then placed a single sheet of paper on my desk.

Resignation letter.

I didn’t even have to open it.

“You’re leaving.”

She nodded once; her shoulders stiff. “I’ve accepted a position with the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Curatorial lead on a special Baroque acquisition.”

I blinked.

“That’s huge.”

“It is.” She cleared her throat. “I didn’t want to say anything until it was official. There were interviews, funding considerations... I wasn’t sure it would work out.”

“You’re moving to Italy,” I said, still absorbing it.

“In six weeks.”

She looked sorry. And I believed her. We’d only been open a few months, and she’d been with me since day one. Vérité’s name carried weight in the right places, but Louisa was the anchor. The scholar. The real deal.

“I thought we had more time,” I admitted.

“I did too.”

I leaned back in my chair. The office still smelled like new carpet, citrus oil, and fresh ambition. Vérité was sleek, minimalist, and designed to look far more established than it was—a polished glass conference table, a curated book collection, and a few carefully hung pieces that whispered legitimacy. The mission was clear:

A nonprofit dedicated to identifying, recovering, and returning stolen artwork to rightful heirs, focused on post-war looting and unethical private acquisitions.

We weren't just writing checks or lending names to exhibitions. That was what legacy families did—quiet philanthropy, tax write-offs, cocktail hours masquerading as causes.

What we were doing at Vérité was different. At least, it was supposed to be.

We were digging into the quiet, often invisible thefts that shaped generational wealth—paintings taken under duress, sculptures shuffled through auction houses with missing years in their provenance, heirlooms hanging in penthouses whose owners didn't care—or didn't want to know—where they came from.

We followed cold trails and dead names and hired researchers to comb through dusty shipping records and museum archives, funding digital restoration scans, private investigators, and legal teams. It wasn't glamorous, it wasn't clean, it was complicated, slow, and full of risk, and it cost more than I'd admitted out loud.

But it mattered.

It was personal to me. My mother had been a patron of the arts—more interested in obscure provenance documents than dinner parties. She used to whisper when we visited galleries: That one shouldn't be here. Or, someone probably lost that to a war or a man with a contract and no conscience.

She never said it for drama. She said it like the truth.

This foundation—this entire concept—was a promise. Maybe to her legacy. Maybe to myself. A way to take the influence I'd been born into and aim it at something that felt like redemption—until she left my father and ran away with her doctor.

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But without Louisa?

Without her quiet authority and museum-world fluency?

We looked like a shell. Worse—a vanity project. A billionaire bored with branding, chasing cultural clout.

And if there was one thing I couldn't afford right now, it was for the wrong people to start whispering that I was out of my depth. I knew how fast that sort of rumor caught fire in rooms full of crystal and curated smiles.

I stood and picked up the letter, scanning the graceful, formal phrasing. She was thanking me. For the opportunity, the trust, the vision.

She should've been the one getting thanked.

"You helped me close Milan," I said, lifting my eyes. "They wouldn't have taken us seriously without you in the room."

"You did the talking," she said, almost amused.

"Maybe. But they listened because you were nodding."

A beat passed between us.

"I'll miss this," she said softly. "What we're building. But Rome..." She exhaled, her eyes lighting with something unspoken. "I couldn't say no."

I reached out and shook her hand. “You shouldn’t have. This is incredible. I’m proud of you.”

Her fingers squeezed mine gently. “You’ll find someone. You always do.”

She let go and turned, pausing at the door. “I’ll stay on for a few more weeks, of course. And anything you need after that—references, remote calls—I’m happy to help.”

Then she was gone.

The door clicked shut behind her with an elegance that somehow made it worse.

I dropped back into my chair and stared at the letter.

Six weeks to replace the only person who made us look like more than a cocktail hour pitch.

Six weeks to convince Judge Valencia—chairman of the Miami Art Association and a man whose only greater passion than lost art was low-stakes golf—that we weren’t built on glass.

Six weeks to keep the press from sniffing too closely at the foundation’s filings. Six weeks to make every invite, every handshake, every champagne toast look like we were thriving.

And now I’d have to do it without the one person who knew how to play the long game.

Without the one person who made this place feel like more than just a beautiful idea, barely held together with charm, strategy, and borrowed time.

My phone buzzed just as I shut the door to the conference room.

Morris Wextner.

Seeing my attorney's name alone triggered a dull ache behind my right eye.

I answered without ceremony. "Tell me you're calling with good news."

"No news is ever that good at two fifteen on a Wednesday," Morris said, dry as sandpaper. "You sitting down?"

I stayed standing. "Try me."

"It's official. The Cut of Her Jibis in bankruptcy processing. Papers were filed this morning."

I exhaled slowly through my nose, gripping the edge of the sleek glass table like it might hold me steady. "And?"

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“And we’ve got a court date. Nothing assigned yet—judge pending.”

The Cut of Her Jibhad been a gamble. A flashy, fashion-forward accessory line launched five years ago with designer handbags, minimalist silk scarves, and a fragrance that, for a hot minute, had a profile in *Vogue*. It had buzz. It had elegance. Then the market shifted, influencers stopped promoting silk, and my so-called creative director decided she wanted to be a wellness guru.

Now, we were bleeding capital and quietly sinking, and I was praying the wreckage didn’t surface too soon.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “How long before my name starts circulating?”

“Technically, you’re insulated. But technically, it doesn’t last forever. If the media starts poking around the court docket—or if a creditor starts talking—you’ll be tied to it.”

“How likely?”

A pause.

“You’re too shiny, Damian. That kind of shine draws light. And attention. If this gets linked to you before the *Vérité* funding solidifies, it’s going to raise questions you don’t want to answer.”

I swore under my breath. “Does Valencia know?”

“Doubt it. But that window is shrinking.”

I didn't respond right away. I just stared out the wall of windows overlooking the marina. Boats lined the slips, pristine and bright in the midday sun, like little floating illusions of control.

“Tell me the second a judge is assigned,” I said.

“Already flagged it.”

I ended the call and slid the phone onto the table, letting it sit there like it might cool off.

This was what it meant to juggle appearances. Keep one arm in philanthropy while the other shoved a sinking brand off a cliff and prayed no one watched it hit bottom.

I'd built a life where the worst thing that could happen wasn't failure.

It was being seen failing.

And right now, the veneer was thinning faster than I could patch it.

I changed my clothes and laced up my running shoes like I was heading into battle.

A full hour had passed since the call with Morris, but the weight of it hadn't budged. The numbers, the implications, the slow bleed from something I used to be proud of—it all pressed against my chest like wet cement. Too much to say out loud. Too risky to name.

So I ran.

Out the front door of the Vérité office, down toward the quiet stretch of Coconut Grove that snaked along the marina. The sidewalks here were wide, shaded by palms and jacarandas, edged with iron gates guarding homes that screamed old money. I kept my pace hard and fast. Focused.

But my thoughts didn't fall in line.

The art show was three weeks out, and country club cocktail hours before that. The donor brunch at the Biltmore in a couple of weeks—all of it stacked like a house of cards—gowns, wine lists, auction items—whispering one thing beneath the surface: Is Sinclair slipping?

They wouldn't ask outright, of course. The Miami elite never said the quiet part out loud. They'd do it in glances. In hesitation. In the fact that my name didn't appear in the event program's top tier.

I clenched my jaw and pushed harder, the slap of my sneakers against the pavement like punctuation.

Reputation was everything. Not just the illusion of wealth but the confidence in it. The ease. No one wanted to write checks to someone who looked like they needed saving. They tried to align themselves with people who had already won. Who didn't sweat. Who always landed on their feet.

Which made this moment, with one foundation barely crawling and another brand in free fall, feel like standing on a trapdoor with my own hand on the lever.

I slowed as I reached the curve near the marina, the kind of view people came to this side of the city to photograph. Bright blue sky, white boats, calm water.

It was quiet here, and for a moment, so was I.

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Then I thought of Juliette.

Not in a clinical way. Not like I should. She wasn't leverage or a reputation booster or someone with strategic value.

She was chaos and comfort. A woman who didn't care if I owned half of Miami or bartended part-time in Brickell. She didn't ask how the foundation was doing. She didn't want reports. She wanted tequila. Music. Pleasure.

She wanted me—or at least the version I let her have.

And I wanted her, because with Juliette, I didn't have to be any version of myself. I could just be.

She was heat in a short sundress, legs for days, and a smirk that told me she always knew more than she was saying. There was something unapologetically alive about her—like she was always dancing just out of reach of consequence. I envied that. The way she moved through life unbothered, unfiltered, like she'd already decided the rules didn't apply.

Jules didn't need my name. She never asked for the fancy dinners or the private drivers. She took what she wanted, when she wanted it, including me.

I pulled out my phone, thumb hovering for a beat before typing.

Damian: Want to crash an auction this weekend? I'll buy you something pretty. If you behave.

I hit send, shoved the phone back in my pocket, and turned toward home.

I'd fix the bankruptcy, find a replacement for Louisa, and spin the next few weeks until Vérité looked bulletproof again.

But first, I needed a weekend with Juliette. Something that didn't require spin. Or polish.

Just a woman who knew exactly how to take the edge off.

And how to sharpen it all over again.

CHAPTER TWO

Juliette

By the time I made it across the yard and up the wraparound porch of the main house, I was already peeling off my blazer. Coconut Grove was sticky in the spring—lush, beautiful, and smug. The kind of heat that turned your hair wild and your patience thin.

I'd spent the day juggling back-to-back lectures on pigment stability and provenance ethics, followed by two hours deep in Anthony's gallery records helping verify the paper trail on a bronze bust with suspicious French origins. Rewarding work, but exhausting. Especially when I knew my twin sister, Gabrielle, would be waiting with a bottle of sparkling water, a baby on her hip, and that look that said: You're saving my life.

She met me at the door, barefoot and glowing.

"You're a saint," she said, holding out Julian like an offering from the heavens. "He's

had two bottles, one meltdown, and no nap.”

I took him easily. “My specialty.”

“Still waiting for your billionaire?” she teased, grabbing her keys from the console table.

“Yours is exhausting enough to count for two,” I shot back.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and kissed Julian on the head. “We won’t be late.”

“You always say that.”

She smirked, halfway out the door already. “Try not to start a revolution while we’re gone.”

“No promises.”

Julian settled faster than expected, drooling on my shoulder and sighing dramatically as if he’d just wrapped up his own lecture tour. I carried him into the living room, careful not to trip over the army of plush toys scattered across the floor.

The space was gorgeous—warm woods, curated chaos, and the priceless painting Gabrielle and I inherited from our grandfather hung above the mantel, with a few family photos here and there, and half-folded laundry. It was the kind of home that proclaimed, “We have money,” but whispered, “and a life, too.”

I rocked Julian gently while scrolling through my phone with one hand. A few emails from students awaited me. A reminder about faculty meeting minutes. A flagged message from the dean asking me to recheck my schedule for next semester. I’d get to it. Maybe.

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My eyes drifted toward the canvas propped against the wall near the kitchen—the one I'd dragged in from the guesthouse porch two days ago: thick brushstrokes, bold color, absolutely zero explanation. I wasn't painting for a gallery or a degree. I painted because sometimes the thoughts in my head needed somewhere else to go.

It was the one thing in my life that didn't require a committee or a footnote.

Julian snored softly against my shoulder, a warm little weight that had completely given up on the world. I carried him across the lawn, the grass cool under my bare feet as I made my way back to the guesthouse where I lived.

The space smelled faintly like oil paint and lemon wood polish, and a breeze slipped through the half-open window, fluttering the edge of a drying canvas. I nudged the door closed with my hip and crossed to the corner where I kept a portable crib set up for nights like this.

Gabrielle didn't even have to ask anymore.

I'd set it up after the first time Julian fell asleep on my chest and Gabrielle didn't have the heart to wake him. Since then, it just stayed. Kind of like me. I wasn't maternal—not in the baby-food and stroller sense—but I loved that kid more than I thought I would.

I laid him down gently, one hand still resting on his chest as I waited for that soft little exhale of surrender. There it was. A sigh, a stretch, and he was out.

I stood there for a second, looking at him. Perfect, small, and completely untouched

by the world's nonsense. He had no idea what provenance meant or how much wine a donor expected at a gala. He didn't know what it meant to want someone and pretend it wasn't real.

Must be nice.

I poured myself a generous glass of rosé and walked out onto the spacious porch, the wooden planks still warm under my feet. The sky was deepening—somewhere between coral and lavender—and the breeze carried just enough salt to remind me why I stayed in Miami, even when it drove me insane.

Inside, the guesthouse was exactly what I needed it to be: lived-in, sun-drenched, and unapologetically mine—thanks to my sister and brother-in-law, Anthony. A stack of art journals sat on the edge of the coffee table, half-topped by old provenance folders. A lacy black bra was draped over the back of a chair from this morning's rush to get dressed. My newest painting leaned against the wall, still wet in one corner—bold reds bleeding into blue like it was trying to decide who it wanted to be.

It was messy and raw—color layered over instinct, not theory. I'd used the wrong brush for the outline, bled through the canvas in one corner, and ruined my favorite shirt in the process. And I loved it. It wasn't publishable. It wasn't grant-worthy. It was mine.

Just like me.

I wasn't interested in perfect. I was interested in real. In color. In heat. In the kind of life that didn't need permission or structure.

Before settling in, I padded inside and over to the corner where Julian slept, the portable crib tucked into a quiet spot. He was still on his back, tiny fists curled, chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. I reached down, brushing my fingertips along

his hand until he shifted slightly in his sleep, then stilled again.

For a second—just a breath—I wondered what having one of my own would be like.

Not borrowed. Not part-time. Mine.

But the thought flickered and faded just as fast. I wasn't built for diapers and preschools and PTA meetings. If I ever needed a baby fix, Julian was always here. I got to keep the wine, the sleep, and the silence.

Still... I lingered for a moment longer, watching him breathe.

Then I turned, reached for my glass of rosé, and let the silence settle around me like silk.

My phone buzzed from where I'd tossed it on the bed. I reached for it without thinking.

Damian: Want to crash an auction this weekend? I'll buy you something pretty. If you behave.

I grinned.

If there was one thing I wasn't built for—it was behaving.

I dialed him. He answered on the second ring, his voice smooth and low like he'd been expecting me.

"Sinclair," I said lazily, curling up on the bed with my wine. "Already bored with your foundation spreadsheets?"

“Painfully. I need a favor from you.”

“Oh, really?” I chuckled.

“I need something beautiful on my arm Saturday night.”

I snorted. “You mean someone who knows how to pronounce Modigliani and won’t fall asleep during the second paddle raise.”

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“Exactly.”

“You know you’re supposed to keep your sugar baby pool separate from your donor list, right?”

“That’s rich coming from someone who once bid on her own painting just to drive up the price.”

“Strategic marketing,” I said, setting my glass down and stretching out across the bed. “Admit it—you just want someone to stroke your ego while ignoring that half your board wants to take me upstairs to their hotel room.”

“If you wore less lipstick, they might survive the encounter.”

“If I wore less lipstick, you wouldn’t last five minutes—and I’d make sure you said thank you when I left... spent and satisfied.”

I felt the heat rise in my belly, slow and familiar. I tugged the strap of my sundress off one shoulder, then the other, lowering the neckline just enough to frame what I knew he liked best. I snapped a photo—angled, suggestive, not subtle—and hit send.

He didn’t reply immediately.

Then a photo buzzed through.

Boxer briefs. Bare stomach. And, clearly, he was very interested in seeing more.

I laughed out loud. “Five seconds, Sinclair? I thought billionaires were supposed to have stamina.”

“I don’t waste time pretending when it comes to you.”

That shut me up for a half second. Then I rolled onto my back and grinned up at the ceiling.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll come. But I’m picking the wine.”

“No meetings. No calls,” he said. “Just you, me, and whatever trouble we get into.”

“I’ll bring heels,” I said. “And maybe something I’ll regret wearing by midnight.”

I hung up before he could get the last word in. He liked that. Not that I cared if he did.

I took another sip of wine and prepared to lay out what I wanted to pack. A black dress, sharp heels, and lingerie that didn’t say love, but said very clearly: You’re not sleeping tonight.

No blazer. No lecture notes. No oversized sweater that made me look too serious. This weekend wasn’t about thinking. It was about letting go, getting loud, getting tangled, and maybe—if he behaved—letting him buy me something lacy I’d never wear again.

Because that was the thing about Damian.

He wasn’t someone I was building a life with. He was someone I escaped life with; for now, that was exactly what I wanted.

CHAPTER THREE

Damian

It was Saturday evening, and the auction hadn't started yet, but the room was already full of people pretending they weren't watching each other.

I shifted my weight and checked my Rolex for the third time in five minutes.

She was late. Not actually late—but late enough to make me notice.

The gallery space was dressed to impress—glass walls, white orchids, uplighting designed to make everyone look twenty percent more successful. The Miami elite glided from champagne flutes to donor boards like this was church, and they were here to pray for influence. No one came here to relax. They came to be seen making power plays that looked effortless.

I was here to be seen.

Buy something high-profile. Shake a few hands. Reinforce the idea that Damian Sinclair still had the eye—and the bank account—to play in their world.

And I could've done it alone. Hell, I probably should've.

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But I'd already sent a car for Juliette.

And now, I couldn't focus on anything except the door.

Then I saw her.

Black dress. Hair down. Skin kissed by that golden Miami dusk. She wasn't just beautiful—she was calculated chaos in heels. A walking distraction wrapped in silk and confidence.

Every conversation I'd half-listened to suddenly dissolved.

She didn't just walk in—she entered like the curtain had just gone up and she was the only act worth watching. Heads turned, subtly. Even people who didn't know her knew enough to stare.

Jules smiled when she spotted me, and my pulse kicked once, hard, before I could stop it.

“You're late,” I said, straightening my cuffs.

She kissed my cheek like it was nothing. “You're early. One of us has a personality.”

I bit back a grin. She always did this—disarmed me with a joke, then walked straight through the defenses I swore were still up.

“You look dangerous,” I said.

“That’s the point.” She looped her arm through mine. “Now, let’s spend your money.”

We made a slow lap through the room, pausing just long enough at the previewed pieces to look cultured. She hummed thoughtfully at a few of the sculptures but said nothing until we reached a jagged, large-format canvas near the center.

“Too red,” she murmured. “Looks like it’s trying too hard.”

“Like the artist next to it?”

“Exactly.”

Before I could respond, I spotted a familiar frame of a man across the room—Judge Valencia, in his usual linen blend, wife beside him in an understated Carolina Herrera.

We made our way over.

“Sinclair,” Valencia said, offering a dry handshake. “Didn’t expect to see you mingling before the paddle waving.”

“Trying to be respectable for once.”

His wife laughed. “That’ll be the day.”

He turned to Juliette. “You’re Gabrielle’s sister, aren’t you?”

“The better-dressed one, yes.”

He chuckled, clearly amused. “Your dedicated volunteer work at the Devereux

Gallery has been impressive. Anthony and the Devereux family are lucky to have both of you.”

Then he turned back to me. “I hear Louisa’s stepping down.”

The words hit harder than I wanted them to. “She is.”

“I assume she’s informed the university?” Judge Valencia asked.

Juliette shook her head, swirling the champagne in her glass. “She’s been on vacation, I think. I haven’t seen her in a couple of weeks.” She smiled, polished and unbothered. “It won’t be the same without her. But now that I’ve got the PhD behind me, I’ve been thinking—maybe it’s time I followed her lead. There’s only so long you can live off tenure-track charm and department coffee.”

Valencia chuckled. “If I can help, let me know.”

Then, the judge turned to me and lifted a brow. “So you haven’t received her resignation yet?”

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“Yes, yes I have,” I said quickly, trying not to let the tension crack my voice.

“She’ll be hard to replace,” he added.

Juliette glanced up at me, amused. “You accepting recommendations?”

I looked at her—really looked—and for a second, my brain did something it shouldn’t have.

Maybe Juliette.

Not just for this event. Not just for the dress or the sex or the way she laughed in the face of men like Valencia.

But for the real thing.

I tamped it down fast, nodding to the judge and his wife as they walked away.

“Why don’t we go find a place to sit?” I said, letting my eyes dip—just briefly—toward the neckline of her dress.

We made our way toward the seating area. Small tables, soft lights, discreet servers weaving through with champagne.

Juliette guided me to a two-top with a perfect view of the stage. Her hand on my arm, her body close enough to keep me half-distracted.

I sat down and exhaled, trying to collect my thoughts.

I needed to focus. I needed to buy something meaningful enough to justify the appearance, something critics would applaud but donors wouldn't question, something expensive but not desperate.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, settling beside me.

"Doubtful."

"You want something with gravitas and price tag flair. But not loud. Not political. Not weird."

I tilted my head, impressed. "You're not wrong."

"I'm never wrong."

She sipped her champagne and leaned back in her chair like she owned the room. Then, just like that, I forgot what the hell I was even here to buy.

The lights dimmed slightly as a man in a tuxedo stepped onto the small stage and tapped the microphone with two polite fingers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll begin shortly. Please take your seats. Paddles are in your programs. Champagne is being replenished as we speak."

Juliette glanced at me sideways, sipping hers like she wasn't already halfway through the evening's entertainment.

"They're opening with filler," she said. "Don't raise your hand unless you want to spend ten grand on regret."

“Duly noted,” I muttered.

I tried to focus on the stage as the first piece came up—a glossy landscape meant for over a gas fireplace in a condo someone inherited from a rich aunt. It was the kind of painting that screamed safe investment but whispered zero soul.

Juliette wrinkled her nose. “That belongs in a hotel hallway.”

I leaned toward her. “You going to guide my taste all night?”

“If you’re lucky.”

Another piece. A moody nude in soft charcoal that made the room collectively shift. A few tentative bids went up.

Juliette barely looked. “Not the one. Wait for Diaz.”

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Her fingers grazed my thigh under the table—just a brush. Not enough to mean anything. Or maybe just enough to mean everything.

I glanced at her.

She looked at the stage, utterly composed.

I adjusted in my seat.

Her hand returned. Higher this time. Her pinky circled lightly, then retreated like a dare she hadn't quite finished.

I swallowed. "You're playing with fire," I murmured.

She didn't look at me. "Then burn."

The next lot came up. José Diaz, the local favorite with the kind of buzz collectors took seriously. Miami-born. Graffiti roots. Now commanding five figures at curated auctions. The crowd leaned in.

Juliette leaned back.

"This one," she said, her voice cool and sharp. "It's the only piece that matters tonight."

I reached under the table as the bidding started. My fingers slid beneath the hem of her dress—higher, warmer, smoother. My breath caught.

She wasn't wearing panties.

I shot her a look, but she didn't move. Didn't blink.

I let my hand drift higher up her inner thigh, slowly. Deliberate. A light touch, nothing crass. Not yet. I curled my fingers and traced the crease where her leg met her hip.

Juliette shifted slightly in her seat, but her face? Pure calm.

"Six thousand," someone called.

"Eight," another bidder answered.

Juliette reached for my paddle like she had all the time in the world and raised it once. "Ten."

I slid one finger between her folds, just barely. Enough to make her legs tense, not enough to break her expression.

"Twelve thousand," came from the back of the room.

Juliette's breath hitched, but she lifted the paddle again. "Fifteen."

I stroked her slowly. A single, cruel glide of pressure.

She inhaled softly and adjusted her seat like nothing was happening. Like she didn't have a man's hand between her thighs at a charity auction surrounded by some of Miami's most watchful eyes.

"Eighteen," came another voice.

“Twenty,” she said—precise, unwavering.

I circled again—firmer now, deliberate. She shifted her hips just slightly, chasing the pressure like she couldn't help it. Her nails tapped the table. Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip.

She looked straight ahead, her eyes cool, and her voice calm. But beneath the table, her body betrayed her. Her thighs tightened. A soft tremor passed through her, subtle enough that no one else would notice.

I leaned in closer, let my thumb graze higher, slower—until she whispered under her breath, “Keep going, and I swear I’ll take the paddle and spank you with it.”

“Sold,” the auctioneer said. “To paddle two-two-nine.”

Juliette set the paddle down with a clink and gripped the edge of the table.

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Her shoulders stayed still. But her thighs? Tight. Quivering.

I leaned in and whispered in her ear.

“That’s number one.”

Her voice was steady, but her lips trembled at the edges. “Don’t start counting unless you plan to finish.”

“Oh, I’m finishing,” I murmured. “And so are you.”

She turned to me, eyes sharp and glassy with satisfaction.

“Get your wallet ready, Sinclair,” she said. “Because after you pay for my painting, you’re going to pay for what’s coming next.”

This night? Just got expensive.

I grinned. “They’ve got my card on file. Let’s head for my room.”

The door clicked shut behind us, the sound muffled by plush carpet and too much tension.

The suite was expensive. Corner view. Sculptural light fixtures. Minimalist furniture. The kind of place designed to impress the unimpressible. Normally, I liked that. Tonight, I didn’t care. I was too focused on the woman currently slipping off her heels like she owned the room.

Juliette moved in slow, deliberate steps, taking in the space, unbothered by the fact that I was standing ten feet away, pulsing with need and watching her like a man who'd lost his last ounce of discipline.

"You paid too much for that painting," I muttered.

"You made me."

She glanced at me, amused. "You make your own choices, Sinclair. You... offered compelling incentives."

Juliette pulled a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket near the bar, popped the cork like it was second nature, and poured herself a glass. No offer for me. She sipped once, then perched on the edge of the couch, legs crossed, dress sliding high up her thigh.

"You going to keep staring, or do you want to know what happens next?"

My voice came out rougher than I meant it to. "Tell me."

Juliette smiled—and that's when I knew I'd already lost this round.

"Good," she said, standing. "Because tonight, you work for me."

She crossed the room slowly, confidently, like every step was part of a performance I hadn't been invited to rehearse. She stopped before me and loosened my tie with a single tug.

"Let's try something different," she said, voice low. "I'm your new advisor. Your newest hire. It's late. We're in your suite. And I'm here to renegotiate my contract."

I could've stopped her. Didn't want to. So, I stood perfectly still as she wrapped my own tie around her hand and used it to lead me backwards, slow, firm, toward the edge of the bed.

"Sit," she said.

I did.

She unbuttoned my shirt, slid it down my arms, and draped it over the nearby chair like she was cataloging a museum piece.

Then she leaned in close, her mouth brushing my ear. "Now listen like a man who's never held power before." And then she blindfolded me with my own tie.

The loss of sight was instant disorientation. All I had left was sensation—her hands, her voice, the sudden drag of her nails down my chest.

I heard her move. A zipper. A soft sigh as she stepped out of her dress—the sound of silk pooling onto the floor.

My breath caught as she pulled off my slacks and boxer briefs and pushed me down onto the mattress.

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Then she straddled me.

Her hands pressed to my shoulders, pinning me there, not hard, but firm. Just enough to say, don't move unless I say so.

"You like to be in control," she said.

I nodded.

"Not tonight."

She slid my cock inside her and rocked her hips once—slow, enough to make me groan—and leaned in again.

"You think because you own things, you understand power. But real power?" she whispered. "That's knowing exactly what a man wants... and making him wait for it."

She kissed down the side of my neck. My pulse throbbed beneath her lips. I reached for her hips, but she caught my wrists mid-air and pinned them back against the mattress.

"No touching unless I say so."

I didn't argue. Couldn't.

Her mouth traveled lower. Her tongue traced the edge of my ribs. Her nails followed after—sharp, slow.

“You’ve been difficult,” she murmured. “So tonight, you’re going to learn what happens when you let go.”

Then she moved.

A slow grind. A deliberate drag of hips that made my spine bow off the mattress. Skin against skin, wet and sinful and wickedly precise. She didn’t ride me—she took me like she’d planned and timed it. Knew exactly how much I could take before I broke.

I didn’t beg.

Not out loud. But inside? I was unraveling.

She changed the rhythm the second I started to chase it. Teasing. Withholding. A dangerous tilt of her hips that stole my control every time I got close to catching it.

She leaned down and whispered something so naughty I forgot how to breathe.

“Give it to me, Damian. I want to own your orgasm.”

Then she bit my shoulder—not hard, just enough to remind me she could.

She kept me right on the edge of release—right there—until my hands twitched in their invisible restraints and I growled her name like a warning.

“You close?” she asked, voice thick with power.

“Yes.”

“Too bad.”

She pulled back completely.

“Damn it.”

The ache hit hard. The denial was sharper than I’d ever admit. My entire body locked down like it couldn’t figure out what had just happened.

Juliette laughed—low, satisfied, utterly in charge.

“Lesson one,” she said, brushing her lips over mine without kissing me, “never underestimate me.”

Then she slid back down. This time, she didn’t hold back.

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She surged forward, a whirlwind of intent. Each thrust was more forceful, more unyielding, as if she had been restraining herself just to teach me a lesson.

I gave up trying to stay silent. My hands gripped the sheets. My hips moved in time with hers because I couldn't meet her pace. I was so far gone—I just needed to be inside her, needed to finish.

And then she clenched around me—tight, pulsing, impossible to resist—and everything else disappeared.

Afterward, I lay there for a while, wrecked. Chest rising and falling, arms loose at my sides, the blindfold still clinging to my temple like a warning label. Somewhere across the room, I heard the sound of the shower. Then the bathroom door creaked open.

I tugged the tie off, blinking into the dim, gold-washed light of the suite.

Juliette came out of the bathroom wearing my shirt with nothing underneath and curled up on the couch, her bare legs tucked beneath her, as if she hadn't just rewritten my operating system and walked away with the manual. Her hair was tousled, her lips still kiss-bitten, and she looked like she'd slept better than I had in a year.

She didn't even look up. "You're quiet," she said, scrolling.

"I'm thinking about how I can repay you."

She smirked, shifting on the couch and lifting one leg up over the backrest—bare skin, long and smooth legs, disappearing under the hem of my shirt. She was still scrolling, still not looking at me.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” she murmured.

I already had.

And the weekend was just getting started.

CHAPTER FOUR

Juliette

The Coconut Grove Country Club looked exactly how I felt—overdressed and pretending not to care.

I tugged my sunglasses down and stepped out of the car, spotting Gabrielle already perched on the terrace patio like she'd been there for hours. Two wine glasses waited between us, sweating gently in the heat, patient, expectant, and smugly chilled. I hated to admit it, but I was still tired from the weekend. Not emotionally. Physically. Damian had worn me out in the best possible way—and now I was paying for it with every step that felt slower than it should.

My thighs ached, and I’d slept through my alarm that morning, which was fine, because I didn’t have anywhere to be. Spring break. No grading, no lectures, no guilt. Just sunshine, mild soreness, and the occasional flashback to Damian’s mouth on my skin.

Gabrielle waved the way only my twin could—impatient and affectionate in the same flick of the wrist.

“Spring break suits you,” she said as I dropped into the seat across from her.

“Because I haven’t had to fake a lecture on pigment degradation all week?”

“Because you’re glowing. Also, your legs should be illegal.”

I grinned and reached for the wine. “I wore sunscreen and sin. It’s a cocktail.”

Gabrielle laughed, and for a minute, we just settled into the quiet hum of the terrace. The breeze off the bay was strong enough to make the heat tolerable. A golf cart zipped by in the distance. Someone’s phone pinged softly three tables over. Everything felt very... curated.

“I left Julian with Aria,” she said, sipping her glass. “She brought an entire tote of plastic zoo animals, so he’ll be fine until at least 3:30.”

“Unless he eats one.”

“He’ll teethe on the tiger and refuse to nap.”

I smiled into my glass. “You’ve memorized your toddler’s chaos patterns.”

“Survival,” she said. “And coffee. Lots of coffee.”

We clinked glasses and drank. For a minute, it was just that—light, easy, twin-sister catch-up with no agenda.

Except... she kept eyeing me like I had a story I wasn’t telling.

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And I did. But I wasn't sharing the part where I'd spent the better part of Saturday pinned to a hotel mattress whispering Damian Sinclair's name in a tone that definitely wasn't academic.

"So," she said after a beat, tilting her head. "Still teaching about dead painters and throwing elbows in the faculty parking lot?"

I exhaled. "Sort of. But honestly? I'm bored."

She blinked. "You?"

"Yeah. I thought finishing the PhD would feel like the top of a mountain, but it just feels... flat. Like I climbed a ladder only to find out it leaned against the wrong wall."

Gabrielle gave me a knowing look, the kind only a twin could deliver without a word.

"I'm proud of it," I added quickly. "I worked my ass off. But I don't want to talk about art anymore. I want to do something with it. Maybe appraisals, private clients... something that lets me move in the world, not just talk about it in theory."

"You always said you wanted something tactile."

"I want to use my eyes. My instincts. Get my hands on real pieces. Not just pass out midterms and break up student arguments about brushstroke symbolism."

Gabrielle nodded slowly. "So what's stopping you?"

I paused. “Nothing. Except money. And inertia. And the terrifying reality that I might actually be good at it... or fail so hard I have to live forever in your guest house.”

She laughed, but not unkindly. “You know you’ll never be a burden, right?”

“I know.” I sipped again. “But it’d be nice to pay rent with more than sarcasm.”

“Anyway,” I said quickly, swirling the wine in my glass. “I’m fine. It’s just one of those next chapter things.”

Gabrielle was still watching me, but the edges of her gaze softened. Then she finally spoke, her voice was lower. Quieter.

“Funny you should say that,” she murmured. “Because I’ve been thinking about what comes next, too.”

Gabrielle’s wine glass hovered near her lips, untouched. Her gaze drifted to the horizon where the tree line met the sky like a watercolor someone had half-finished and never returned to.

“What do you mean?” I murmured.

“About next chapters.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Please don’t tell me you’re quitting the gallery to raise goats and make handmade soap in Asheville.”

She smirked, but it faded quickly. “I’ve been trying to get pregnant.”

That stopped me cold.

“You mean... you and Anthony?”

She nodded once. “Since just after the new year.”

I sat back in my chair. “You didn’t say anything.”

She gave a small shrug. “We thought it would just... happen. Like it did the first time.”

The way her voice dipped made something tighten in my chest.

Gabrielle was the calm one. The planner. She was the spreadsheet to my sketchbook. The last time she’d sounded like this—fragile, uncertain—was after our mom died. And even then, she held it together better than I did.

“What did your doctor say?” I asked gently.

“She ran a full panel. Hormones, ultrasounds, the works.” Her jaw tensed. “There might be a structural issue. Scar tissue. Or a hormonal imbalance. It’s not conclusive yet, but...”

She trailed off, finally sipping her wine.

“But?” I prompted.

“She mentioned it could be hereditary.” Gabrielle’s eyes met mine then, and I saw it—that quiet desperation she was trying so hard to smother. “That maybe there’s a reason Mom only had one pregnancy.”

The weight of that landed heavier than I expected.

Mom never talked about fertility. She didn’t talk about much, honestly—not the big stuff. Not unless we dragged it out of her. I’d always assumed she didn’t want more kids, that we were enough. But maybe... maybe she didn’t have a choice.

“She’s not here to ask,” Gabrielle added softly, as if reading my mind. “And now we’ve both got a question mark we can’t erase.”

I sat quietly, swirling my glass. The wine caught the sunlight and cast little pink constellations on the tablecloth. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t even know how I felt.

Gabrielle looked down at her hands. “I’m scheduled for another test next week. Then we’ll talk about IVF.”

“And Anthony...?”

“He knows some of it. But I haven’t told him about the odds. The condition. Any of

it.” She looked up. “I wanted to tell you first.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my twin. I don’t have to explain things to you. You’ll understand even when I don’t make sense.”

I swallowed hard. “You don’t have to make sense to me, Gabs. You just have to tell me the truth.”

She smiled, but it was forced. “I’m scared this might be it. That Julian was the only chance I had. And if that’s true... I just needed someone to know.”

I reached across the table and laid my hand over hers.

She squeezed back, then added, “You should get checked too. If you ever think you might want kids. You might not—but if you do, you need to know.”

I tried to laugh. “You do realize I’m still in the ‘I need a three-day recovery window after a wild weekend’ phase of my life, right?”

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. “You also realize that the phase can run out at any moment.”

“Not everyone’s clock is ticking.”

“No,” she said quietly. “But some of ours start early.”

That one got to me.

I looked out over the green, blinking against the sun. Then, like she couldn’t help

herself, Gabrielle added one more thing—casual on the surface, but sharp underneath.

“You know, if you want kids eventually... IVF isn’t so bad. Some women use anonymous donors. Or they ask someone they trust.”

I smirked. “You offering Anthony up?”

She gave me a look. “God, no. But you already sleep with a billionaire who has unnervingly good genes and zero emotional boundaries.”

I nearly choked on my rosé. “You want me to ask Damiano to be my sperm donor?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I’m just saying... it wouldn’t be the worst cocktail to shake.”

“You’re insane.”

“Maybe. But you’re the one sleeping with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not exactly picking china patterns.”

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“No. But you could pick his DNA.”

I tossed a cloth napkin at her. She laughed, but something in me twisted—because now I couldn’t unhear it.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “Eventually.”

She nodded. “That’s all I wanted.”

We didn’t say much after that. But the silence didn’t feel awkward. It felt earned.

And when she reached over to refill my glass, I let her—even though mine wasn’t empty yet.

By the time we split the bill and hugged goodbye in the breezeway, the sun was thick in the sky, mid-afternoon and unapologetic, casting everything in a slow, honeyed heat that clung to my skin and made Coconut Grove shimmer like a movie set right before the kiss.

Gabrielle pulled out first, waving from her BMW convertible with her oversized sunglasses and a to-go cup of sparkling water tucked between her thighs like a woman who’d done this a hundred times.

I watched her go.

It wasn’t jealousy I felt. Not exactly. Gabrielle had a life. A beautiful, complex, exhausting, fulfilling life—and for the most part, I loved being part of it. But there

were moments like now, when the silence returned, where I realized I was the only one still orbiting.

Still floating.

I slid into my car and shut the door, letting the quiet wrap around me like a seatbelt. The leather was warm, sun-soaked. Familiar. I pulled my sunglasses back on even though I didn't need them and stared straight ahead at the parking lot for a full thirty seconds without starting the engine.

She told me first.

That part stuck more than I thought it would. Gabrielle had Anthony. She had friends. She had a whole curated gallery of people who'd show up if she asked—but she picked me.

Because I was her twin.

Because we shared the same blood, the same bones, and apparently, possibly, the same expiration date on our fertility.

I didn't want to think about that. About appointments, doctors, or what might be hiding under the surface of my own medical chart. I wasn't even sure I wanted kids. I'd spent most of my adult life convincing myself I didn't—and most of my twenties convincing men that it didn't make me broken.

But now? That unspokenmaybewas louder than I expected.

What if Gabrielle was right? What if I didn't have all the time I thought I did?

What if someday I wanted a version of the chaos she lived with—and it was too late?

The thought made my throat tighten—sharp and unwelcome, like someone had reached in and flicked a switch I didn't know was wired to anything.

I unlocked my phone and opened the browser with mechanical precision, fingers moving faster than my thoughts. Fertility clinic Miami. That was all I typed. Just three words. No punctuation. No specifics. And then I just sat there, staring at the blinking cursor like it might answer the question for me.

It didn't. It just blinked. Steady. Waiting. Like it had all the time in the world.

Perhaps, I didn't. That was the part that scared me.

I locked the screen and tossed the phone into the passenger seat with more force than necessary. It landed with a dull thud, sliding against the leather like even it was tired of me pretending I wasn't panicking.

“Not today,” I muttered.

Maybe not tomorrow either.

Maybe not until I could admit I wanted to know the answer.

And maybe I wasn't there yet.

But the question was already planted—deep and uncomfortable like a seed in dry soil.

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And whether I watered it or not... it was still there.

I glanced at myself in the rearview mirror—hair wind-tossed, lips a little too pink, a smudge of mascara I hadn't bothered to fix. I looked like myself. But under it, something was shifting. Something I couldn't name yet.

I started the car and rolled down the window, letting the breeze rush in. The scent of cut grass and gardenias drifted through the air.

I didn't turn on the radio.

I didn't call Damian, even though part of me wanted to.

I just sat there for a moment longer, the car idling under my hands, and let myself feel everything I wasn't ready to say out loud.

Then I pulled out of the parking lot, sunglasses on, heart tight, and headed back to the guest house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Damian

The sun hit the bay like it knew it was being watched, reflecting just enough shimmer off the water to remind you how expensive this view was.

The Coconut Grove Yacht Club was exactly what it had always been: curated

elegance with a side of smug tradition with polished teak decking. The staff wore white polos and navy hats, and the glass doors were so clean you could mistake them for open air. The kind of place where men my age shook hands like they were still auditioning for a board seat, and their wives wore heels too high for grass.

I checked my watch. One-oh-five. Technically late, but fashionably so.

Anthony was already at a corner table on the upper terrace, shaded beneath a broad umbrella and wearing the relaxed confidence of a man who never had to ask for his preferred table twice. One arm was hooked over the back of the chair, and the other curled around a lowball glass, condensation just beginning to slide down the sides.

He looked up and smirked. “You’re lucky. Gabrielle said if I interrupted her lunch with Juliette, I’d be eating blended food for a week. So I gave you a call so we could catch up.”

I slid into the seat across from him, loosening the top button of my shirt. “Twin-sister confidentiality?”

He raised his glass. “Sealed tighter than an NDA.”

“Juliette left me with a few bruises,” I said smoothly. “But not the kind that needed stitches.”

He laughed and flagged down the waiter. “Two of the same,” he told the guy, nodding at his drink. “You need it more than I do.”

He wasn’t wrong.

The heat pressed down heavy this afternoon—sticky, shimmering, the kind that made your collar feel too tight no matter how perfectly pressed your shirt had started out.

The club was busy, but not loud. Just the usual collection of quiet power brokers and bored wives, gossiping behind their sunglasses while pretending not to notice who was walking by.

I gave a few nods. Made eye contact with a woman I didn't recognize, but who clearly recognized me. A smile. Just enough charm to keep the performance going.

Because that's what this was now—a performance.

I'd learned early on that if you wore confidence like a suit, people rarely asked what you had underneath. So I gave them the version they wanted: tailored, tanned, just the right shade of amused. Not a man who'd just watched one company sink while trying to steer another into uncharted waters. Not the guy who'd woken up this morning with a pit in his stomach and a calendar full of meetings he couldn't afford to cancel.

The drink came. I sipped slowly, like I had all the time in the world.

"How's Vérité?" Anthony asked, easily, but pointed.

I leaned back. "Holding. The board's quiet. Valencia sent a bottle of wine after the press release about the Diaz acquisition. I think that was his way of saying 'well done' without having to type it."

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "So you're still on his good side."

"For now."

He nodded, like he knew exactly how temporary for now could be.

I kept my posture relaxed. My tone was casual. But the truth was, I hadn't felt this tightly wound since... well, since the last time I'd watched one of my property deals

slide sideways and realized there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it.

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Only this time, the stakes were higher. Vérité wasn't just my reputation—it was my last shot at something that looked like legacy. Not a flashy exit or another quarterly win. Something that mattered. Something I hadn't inherited. Something I believed in.

And I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep the cracks from showing. I waited until the second drink arrived before I said anything.

Not because I needed liquid courage—I wasn't that far gone yet—but because the silence between us had started to stretch. Anthony was too sharp not to notice the cracks forming beneath the surface. And I knew if I didn't say it now, I'd spin another performance, deflect again, and walk out of here pretending I still had the upper hand.

I leaned back in my chair, angled just enough so I didn't have to look directly at him.

"It's done," I said quietly.

Anthony glanced up from his drink. "What is?"

"The Cut of Her Jib. It's bankrupt. The filings are already in motion."

He stilled—not visibly, not dramatically—but the kind of pause that told me he understood exactly what I wasn't saying.

"The investors are out," I went on. "Margins collapsed six months ago. I tried to pivot—added a new production line, went heavier on direct-to-consumer—but it didn't move the needle. Inventory choked the warehouse. The fragrance line flatlined.

Nobody wants silk scarves right now, apparently.”

Anthony didn’t speak. Just let the silence do the cutting.

“I’m trying to keep it quiet,” I said. “The press hasn’t picked up on it yet. But it’s coming. And when it does...”

“It’ll bleed,” he finished for me. “Into Vérité.”

I nodded once. “I’m doing everything I can to firewall the foundation, but optics don’t care about intention. One bad headline, and donors start backing away like they smell smoke.”

Anthony turned his glass in slow circles on the table. “It’s not just your reputation anymore,” he said. “It’s tied to other people’s work. To history.”

The weight of that hit harder than I expected.

He wasn’t lecturing. He wasn’t even wrong.

He was just reminding me of the one thing I’d tried not to think about: Vérité wasn’t just my clean slate anymore. It was bigger than that now. Bigger than me.

“I know,” I said. “I’ve been watching the board tiptoe around Louisa’s exit like it’s a funeral. They want a replacement yesterday. And I don’t have one.”

“You haven’t even started looking?” he asked, brows drawing together.

“I’ve floated names. But no one feels like the right fit. Not for what we’re doing. Not for restitution. For legacy.”

I didn't say what I was thinking—that one of the only people who might be the right fit was sipping wine with his wife and probably wearing something short enough to ruin my concentration for the rest of the day.

Juliette.

She had the credentials, the eye, the passion, and the right mix of skepticism and instinct that made her dangerous in the best way.

But the idea of putting her in that role?

I could already see the disaster unfolding—locked office doors, missed meetings, long hours turning into longer nights until we weren't talking about Kandinsky anymore, we weretesting the desk's structural integrity.

Hell, I'd already wasted half the morning coming up with reasons to text her. A shipping update from the gallery. A foundation email she didn't even need to see. A joke she probably wouldn't laugh at—so I didn't send it.

What kind of man got distracted by a woman he wasn't even trying to impress?

What kind of man couldn't stop thinking about her, even in a busy place like this?

A stupid one. A teenager in a tailored shirt.

I shifted in my seat and forced the thought out of my head.

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“And I’ve got the Germany trip coming up in three weeks,” I added. “A restitution handoff. A Kandinsky, stolen in 1941. The family wants it returned directly. No headlines. No gala. Just me, the art, and a curator at the regional museum in Baden-Baden.”

Anthony blinked. “And you’re flying it in yourself?”

“I’m taking a private jet the agency keeps on retainer. Security’s already coordinated. But it has to be personal. Symbolic. We’re trying to build trust.”

Then I shook my head and smiled, humorless. “A job for someone with credibility. And right now, all I have is polish over a crack I hadn’t figured out how to seal.”

He sat back slowly. “That’s a high-profile move for someone trying to dodge bad press.”

“Tell me about it.”

I took another sip of my drink, letting the bitterness settle on my tongue before swallowing it down. The collar of my shirt suddenly felt tighter, though I wasn’t even wearing a tie.

“I can keep the foundation standing,” I said. “But I don’t know how many more leaks I can plug before someone notices I’m using duct tape.”

Anthony didn’t say anything for a long moment.

Then he nodded once. “Then you’d better figure out who’s got steady hands. Because the next drop’s not going to be private.”

Anthony sipped his drink, slow and thoughtful. Then, without looking up, he asked, “So what’s the plan?”

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders like the question’s weight didn’t land the way it did. “Ride it out,” I said. “Keep things polished. Name a new advisor with museum-world clout. Let the Diaz acquisition carry the headlines for another week or two. Schedule a donation drive, leak a photo of me shaking hands with someone respectable, and pray the bankruptcy filing gets buried under someone else’s scandal.”

Anthony made a noncommittal noise, but I saw the flicker of skepticism in his eyes.

“And Juliette?”

It came out too casually. Like he was just curious. But Anthony didn’t ask casual questions. Ever.

I gave him a grin, the practiced kind that didn’t touch the parts of me that mattered. “She’s a hell of a time. Smart, hot, wild. I can’t even find my little black book anymore.”

It was a joke. Mostly. But I heard the hollowness in my voice the second it left my mouth.

Anthony didn’t laugh. He just raised a brow and waited, like he was giving me space to backpedal—or dig deeper.

I tapped the edge of my glass. “She’s fun. And she doesn’t want anything complicated. That’s the best part.”

Anthony didn't speak, so I filled the silence. "She's not looking for rings or titles. She's not asking questions. She's untamed. The kind of woman who shows up, looks incredible, blows your mind, and then goes home to paint like nothing happened."

My voice had gotten quieter. Tighter. Because even as I said it, I couldn't stop the thought from sliding in sideways?—

What would happen if she asked for more?

And why the hell was I afraid I'd say yes?

Anthony's phone buzzed with a soft chime, and he gave me a nod before answering it. Something work-related, probably. Something solvable.

I stood, straightened my cuffs, and went down to the dock without waiting to say goodbye.

The sun was at its peak now, throwing gold across the water like someone had cracked a bottle of vintage champagne and poured it over the bay. The boats rocked gently in their slips, expensive and still, ropes tight, paint glinting. Everything looked calculated, serene—like the entire marina had been arranged for a photo shoot I hadn't agreed to be in.

I walked to the end of the dock and rested both hands on the railing, watching the water ripple between the hulls. The surface shimmered, perfect and controlled, but I knew better. Underneath, everything was shifting—pushing, tugging.

The calmest days could still hide the strongest undertow. It looked like nothing was about to break. But then again, so did I.

The wind lifted slightly, just enough to rustle my shirt and cool the sweat gathering at

the base of my spine. I should've felt relieved. Unburdened. I'd finally said it out loud—admitted the bankruptcy, acknowledged the cracks. But the weight hadn't left.

It had just settled differently. Lower. Heavier.

And Juliette...

She shouldn't be the thing circling in my thoughts. Not when I was trying to hold together a reputation, a foundation, a future. But she was there anyway—barefoot in my hotel room, laughing in that untamed way that made my blood rush through my veins. Uncomplicated. But nothing that got under your skin ever stayed uncomplicated.

I stared out at the open water.

Everything looked calm. Perfect. Like nothing was about to break. Yet even the calmest surface couldn't hide a leak forever—sooner or later, I would run out of ways to plug the holes.

CHAPTER SIX

Juliette

I stared at the screen, cursor blinking like it was daring me to take it back.

But I didn't. I hit send.

My resignation from the University of Miami will be effective two weeks from today. No dramatic declarations, no soapbox statements—just a clean, professional goodbye wrapped in three polite paragraphs and a signature that, for once, felt like my own.

The moment it was gone, I leaned back in my chair and exhaled. Not a sigh. Not

regret. Just... release. A pressure I hadn't even realized was pressing on my chest slipped off like an old coat.

I was done playing professor. No more pretending to be fulfilled while grading recycled thoughts about Baroque lighting and Van Gogh's brushstroke angst.

I wanted real things. Real rooms. Real art.

And maybe... a real life.

I picked up my phone and tapped out a message before I could overthink it.

Juliette: Dinner at nine tonight. Bring wine. I'll bring the charm. And if Gabrielle and Anthony go to bed early enough, I might even go for a midnight swim. No suit required.

The three dots appeared almost instantly.

Damian: Be there. I'll behave. Until the pool.

I smirked. Someone was waiting for an excuse.

I stood, padded barefoot into the kitchen, and started putting together a grocery order—salmon, lemons, arborio rice, chocolate, and a few other things that felt indulgent but low-effort. Cooking relaxed me. And if I was feeding Damian Sinclair, I wasn't phoning it in.

Once the order was submitted, I pulled my laptop back out—this time to open a different tab.

Miami Fertility Clinic. I clicked through the options, filled in the form, and pressed

call before I could lose my nerve.

After two rings, a cheerful voice picked up, and I asked for a consultation. She walked me through the intake and asked a few clinical questions. Then, “If you’re currently on birth control, you’ll need to stop before we can run a full panel of diagnostics. You’ll want to do that at least a few days ahead of your appointment.”

I made an appointment, thanked her, and hung up, then wandered back into my bedroom.

The drawer slid open easily. My pill pack sat right on top—almost empty—only one left. I picked it up and turned it over in my hand, the plastic cool against my fingertips. No symbolism. No dramatics. Just one tiny, familiar decision waiting for me to make the next.

Not yet.

Damian showed up like he always did, looking like a magazine ad for a sexy off-limits billionaire. Faded jeans that probably cost more than my car’s insurance, a crisp white shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and the kind of cologne that made me want to lean in for reasons that had nothing to do with politeness.

He held up a bottle of red like a peace offering. “Cabernet. From Napa. Nothing too flashy.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I said, taking it from him and handing him the corkscrew. “You brought it, you open it. House rules.”

He smirked, already working the foil. “Noted.”

The salmon was already in the oven, and the risotto just needed tending. He followed

me into the kitchen with two glasses and leaned against the counter while I stirred. It wasn't domestic—not really—but it felt warm. Easy. Like we'd done this before.

We hadn't.

"What's the deal with the appraisal business?" he asked after a few bites of salad.

"You serious?"

"Serious enough to turn in my resignation and order a stack of blank invoices." I sipped. "I've got my credentials and know what I'm looking at. It's just a matter of getting clients."

"You want some leads?"

I arched a brow. "Are they good leads or pity leads?"

"Real leads," he said. "A Coral Gables estate—old money, just lost their patriarch. They're trying to catalog what's real and what's inherited nonsense."

"And the second one?"

"A guy in Brickell. Mid-thirties, tech money, fully paranoid. Thinks every gallery's trying to scam him. He needs appraisals before he'll insure anything."

I made a face. "So a headache."

"Possibly," he said. "But a well-paying one."

I nodded slowly. "I'll start with the estate. But I'll take Brickell if I need a tax write-off for wine and therapy."

He laughed, deep and honest, then poured more wine. “You’ll need an assistant if this scales,” he added. “And I’ll need one for the Germany trip. I’ve got forms, manifests, insurance documents—and Louisa’s out already.”

I stirred the risotto without answering right away.

That wasn’t flirtation. That was trust, and the part that surprised me? I wanted to say yes, not just because I could help, but because I wanted to be in the room. At the table. Doing the work.

I slid a glance toward him. “You sure you can afford my rates?”

Damian grinned. “Depends. Do they include midnight swims?”

I bumped his hip with mine and checked the timer. Ten more minutes.

Plenty of time to finish dinner.

And decide whether or not to keep pretending this wasn’t changing everything.

After we cleared the dishes—him drying, me washing, both of us pretending we hadn’t just discussed something other than fun and adventure—I made a quiet trip across the lawn to the main house. The porch lights were off. Gabrielle and Anthony’s bedroom window glowed faintly for a second, then blinked out.

Showtime.

I walked back barefoot, the grass cool between my toes, air thick with the scent of citrus and chlorine. The night was warm, still, slow in that way only Coconut Grove managed to be after midnight. I slid open the guesthouse door?—

And stopped.

Damian was already outside, barefoot and shirtless, standing at the edge of the pool like a damn Greek statue someone had tossed into 2025 and given a smug streak. His boxer-briefs were on the patio tile behind him—forgotten. Or maybe just discarded with intention.

The Sinclair smirk was locked and loaded. “Took you long enough.”

I leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “You always get naked unsupervised, or is this a special occasion?”

“I figured I’d get a head start. You’re the one who promised a show.”

My eyes dragged over him deliberately—his chest, his stomach, the low-slung line of his hips that always made me feel like I was standing too close to the edge of something dangerous. Hewasn’t posing. He didn’t need to. The man had been born with swagger.

I stepped out into the moonlight and began unbuttoning my dress, slow and silent, enjoying the way his mouth parted slightly as it slipped off my shoulders and pooled at my feet.

“Should I have packed a swimsuit?” he asked, voice just a little rougher.

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“Swimsuits are discouraged,” I said, unclipping my bra with a shrug. “Skinny dipping is on the menu tonight, remember?”

His eyes tracked every movement, but he didn’t reach for me. Not yet.

We slid into the water from opposite ends, letting the silence build. The pool glowed pale blue beneath us, light catching the ripples like stars that hadn’t decided where to land.

I swam toward him, arms slow, steady.

He met me halfway, hands finding my waist under the surface as I curled my legs around his hips. My arms went around his neck, skin to skin, mouth to mouth.

The kiss wasn’t frantic. It was full.

Measured.

Anchored in something we hadn’t named yet, but both felt tugging under the surface.

His hands slid lower, palms gliding over the curve of my hips beneath the surface, fingers slipping just far enough to make my breath catch.

Mine tangled in his hair, wet and slick between my fingers, and I tugged just hard enough to earn that low sound from his throat—the one that always made my stomach tighten.

The water shifted around us, sloshing gently against the tile as I moved against him, slow and deliberate. My legs tightened around his waist, and I felt him hard and ready beneath me, no barriers, no hesitation. Just heat and need, barely restrained.

His mouth found my neck, his tongue tracing the edge of my jaw like he wanted to memorize it, and then he sucked on my earlobe in a way that made me pulse between my thighs.

I pressed closer, letting my body grind against his, teasing us both.

His hands squeezed my ass, pulling me tighter as he bit down gently on my shoulder, and I arched against him, letting the friction build.

And for once, it wasn't just lust. It was easy. It was electric, and it was real.

We dried off in silence, passing a towel between us like we were trying not to break whatever had settled over us in the water—something quieter than heat but just as charged. Damian followed me inside without a word, barefoot and shirtless, his jeans riding low on his hips, hair still damp, a half-smile curving like he already knew what I was about to say.

But I didn't say anything right away.

I stood in the doorway of my bedroom, leaning against the frame, watching him cross the room and drop his phone and wallet onto the dresser like this was routine. Like he'd done it before. Like we'd done this before.

We hadn't.

Not like this.

I crossed my arms, casual but firm, and let my eyes trail over him. His skin still held the warmth of the night, and he smelled like salt and wine and that damn cologne that always made me feel reckless.

“You’re staying,” I said.

Not a question.

Damian raised one brow, just a flicker of surprise before that smug little smile reappeared. “Is that so?”

I nodded. “No shoes, no keys, no excuses.”

He walked toward me, slow and deliberate. “You sure?”

I stepped back into the room, giving him space to follow. “I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t.”

We showered and fell into bed without urgency. No tugging or tearing, no grabbing like we were starving. It wasn’t about needing anymore—it was about choosing.

I straddled him slowly, skin against skin, easing down until we both exhaled. He let me set the rhythm, hands resting on my thighs, letting me take what I wanted. The way he looked at me—steady, focused—made it feel like more than lust.

We moved together, quietly, like we were trying not to wake something too fragile to name.

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No words. Just tension and release.

When it was over, I lay beside him with my leg thrown over his hip, his breathing still heavy against my neck. He felt solid. Settled. It's something I could've sunk into if I had let myself.

But I didn't sleep.

Not yet.

I slipped out of bed quietly, careful not to wake him, and padded into the bathroom. The tile was cool under my feet, and the air smelled like steam, skin, and something distinctly male.

I opened the drawer. The pill pack sat right where I'd left it that morning.

One left.

I stared at it for a second, running my thumb along the edge of the foil. It should've felt like a bigger moment. Some grand internal declaration. A symbolic shift.

But all I felt was... clarity. I wasn't scared. I wasn't even hesitant.

I was just ready.

Ready to choose for myself—for once, not because of timing or expectations or some neat little box I was supposed to fit into. Not because of a man. Not even Damian.

This was mine.

I popped the last pill free, washed it down with a sip of water from the glass on the counter, and tossed the empty pack into the trash can like it didn't deserve a ceremony.

I looked up and caught my own eyes in the mirror.

Steady. A little flushed. A little wild.

Tomorrow, it's real.

And I wasn't afraid of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Damian

I woke up in her bed.

And for the first time in... maybe ever—I hadn't already planned my exit.

The sunlight slanted in through linen curtains, soft and golden, brushing across the exposed curve of her back. Her hair was a mess, half fanned over her pillow, half stuck to her shoulder. One leg stretched out from under the sheet, all smooth skin and quiet chaos.

Juliette Vanderburg was sleeping like I hadn't ruined her rhythm last night and was still here. I should've left hours ago, but I didn't. I didn't want to.

Was that the part that scared me?

I lay there for a while, listening to her breathe, feeling the unfamiliar weight of something that wasn't lust. Not anymore. This felt... settled. Warm in a way that didn't burn. Like it belonged here, in this bed, with her.

That was the first sign of trouble.

The second came when my brain kicked in and reminded me that this—waking up beside a woman like her, in a house that wasn't mine—was dangerous. It blurred things. It made me start imagining that mornings like this could become a habit.

I needed to reset. Reclaim control.

“Let me take you to breakfast,” I said quietly, shifting just enough to press a kiss to her shoulder.

She stirred with a sleepy murmur, then smiled.

“Only if I get to pick the place.”

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I grinned. There she was. “Deal. Just so you know, I don’t like to wait for pancakes.”

She rolled over, stretching like a cat, completely unapologetic about being naked and entirely in charge of the space between us.

It was infuriating how good she looked like this—hair wild, face flushed, absolutely at ease.

We dressed in the easy silence of people who’d slept together often but never stayed. I found my watch on her nightstand, next to a book of essays on modern surrealism and a bottle of perfume.

As she slipped on a pair of cutoff shorts and a cropped tank, I pulled my shirt over my head and offered—too casually— “You know... we’ve got a small office open at Vérité. Could be a good temp setup for your new business. Private. Quiet. Yours, if you want it.”

She paused, one foot halfway into a sandal, and glanced over at me. “You offering me a job?”

“Just space,” I said. “A door and a desk. You’re too dangerous to manage.”

She laughed and finished dressing without saying yes or no.

I grabbed my keys, trying not to think about the fact that I still didn’t want to leave.

We drove separately to the café.

I told myself it made sense—she had errands to run afterward, and I needed to head into Vérité. But the truth?

I wasn't sure what we were yet.

Whatever last night was, it still hadn't settled into a category I knew how to navigate.

The café she chose sat at the corner of a shady block just off Ocean Blvd., all terra cotta pots and climbing ivy, the kind of place with fresh pastries and servers who didn't write anything down. The breeze off the bay cut through the morning heat, and the awning cast the table in soft shadow.

She was already there when I arrived—sunglasses perched on her head, hair twisted up like she hadn't tried too hard. And then there was the top—cropped, ribbed, and so fitted it made my brain forget the point of conversation.

I sat down across from her and let the server pour water before breaking the silence.

“You slept?” I asked.

“Like a woman who made excellent choices,” she said, sipping her water.

I smiled, even as I tried to pull myself back into something that resembled control. “You give my ego too much credit.”

“Your ego doesn't need help.”

There it was again. Not flirtation, not exactly. Just clarity. Confidence. A woman who knew her worth and didn't care if I saw it.

We ordered breakfast—hers: the fruit plate and black coffee; mine: scrambled eggs

and something carby I wouldn't finish.

When the waiter left, I cleared my throat. "That office I mentioned—at Vérité. Still available. If you want it."

Juliette took a sip of her coffee, cool as ever. "I do. For now. But I've already contacted a realtor in Coconut Grove about renting something permanent nearby. I'd rather build my own space than borrow someone else's long-term."

The smile I gave her was automatic. Too smooth to be sincere. "Of course. Makes sense."

Inside, though? It landed like a gut punch. Not because she didn't appreciate the offer, but because she didn't need it. Or me.

It wasn't rejection. But it wasn't the playful tug-of-war I was used to either. This was Juliette, the expert. Juliette the partner. And apparently, I didn't know what the hell to do with that.

I adjusted my watch, trying not to stare at her breasts shifting slightly in that infernal top as she leaned forward. Less than twelve hours ago, I had touched every inch of her, and now I was sitting here like an intern, trying not to get caught ogling the boss.

"About Germany," I said, steering the conversation back into waters I understood. "The handoff is in three weeks. Baden-Baden. The Kandinsky piece has a full provenance trail. But I still need help with the export documentation and verifying the chain of custody, especially if we will include any press coverage. There will be no language barrier. I'm fluent in French and German."

Juliette reached for her phone and started typing without a word.

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“You’re in?” I asked, watching the curve of her mouth as she read over something in her notes.

“Of course I’m in,” she said, touching my hand. “Just give me access to the files. I’ll build out the checklist. I’ll make a note to try to cancel my lease.”

I nodded, “Let me know if he holds you to it. I will be glad to pay all fees.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

I resisted the very real urge to lean across the table and kiss her just for being competent. There was something deeply unfair about a woman who could turn you inside out one night and then meet you for coffee the next morning like she hadn’t just made you question every boundary you ever built.

She looked up and smiled, casual. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said.

It wasn’t a lie.

Not really.

It was everything.

In the late afternoon, after moving some of Juliette’s files into the Vérité office building, I looked up from reviewing the reservations for the Germany trip. The

office was too quiet—the kind of quiet that told you someone was working.

Not killing time. Not scrolling. Working.

I stood, rolled my shoulders once, and wandered toward the back hallway. Passed the empty conference room, double-checked the Lufthansa confirmation on my phone, and instinctively thumbed over to my inbox.

A new message blinked from Hopewell School—subject line: Update on Mateo + Tuition.

I paused.

The thread was long, tucked beneath quarterly reports and receipts. But the message at the top was short.

Mateo passed his mid-term finals. The spring term starts soon.

I stared at it for a beat longer than I meant to. Then tapped out a response:

Tell him the world needs smart kids who've seen real things. And to email me if he needs more for books or special events.

I hit send, pocketed the phone, and kept moving.

Past the conference room. Down the back wing. Toward the office we'd cleared for Juliette.

Because no matter how much noise I carried in my head... Her quiet was the kind I didn't mind walking into.

But the second I turned the corner and saw her there—hair twisted up, glasses perched low on her nose, one knee drawn up in her chair like she owned the space—I felt something settle in my chest. Then shift.

She didn't see me.

Her attention was locked on the stack of images in front of her—prints from the Coral Gables estate, judging by the notations in the margins. She'd circled certain corners, scribbled arrows between notes, and cross-referenced museum tags in a new little notebook she kept by her elbow.

The office printer whirled softly behind her, spitting out the next set of scans. She glanced over her shoulder once, mentally tracking the pages, then returned to what was in front of her without missing a beat. Efficient. Focused. Like she had an internal clock running and didn't plan to waste a second.

She was all in. No makeup. No posing. Just focus.

She bit her bottom lip when she leaned in to look at one of the oil portraits—an instinctive thing, totally unaware. She tapped the side of her pen against her chin and made another note. She didn't glance up once the whole time, and I didn't say anything. I just stood there, watching her.

Because it hit me—hard and fast—that she wasn't just doing this to keep busy.

She wasn't doing it for me.

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Jules was building something. Claiming space. Proving she didn't need anyone to open a door for her—she'd find the damn blueprints and build her own entrance.

Hell, she was more knowledgeable than I was.

My phone buzzed with a reminder, but I didn't move.

Then her laptop chimed—a new message. She clicked it open and tilted the screen toward herself, so I didn't catch the whole thing. Just the sender:Brickell Collector.

And the first line of the email:Can't wait to show you the full collection :-)

The wink wasn't necessary.

The little knot in my jaw? Also unnecessary—but very, very real.

I had no right to be annoyed. None.

But I was.

Not because I thought she owed me exclusivity. Not even because I thought the guy had a chance. But because, for the first time, I wasn't sure if I was central to her world anymore, or just orbiting somewhere on the edge, hoping gravity would pull me back in.

She smiled at the screen. Small. Brief.

Then she went back to her notes.

Yet, I just stood there in the hallway like a man trying to figure out when the hell everything changed.

I shut the door to my office with more force than necessary. Not loud. Not aggressive. Just final. A quiet little slam that said: no interruptions.

The click echoed in the space, which was filled with glass, stone, and polished steel. Everything inside Vérité was designed to look modern, minimal, and under control—just like me.

Or so I'd always pretended.

I paced once, twice, then stopped in front of the window that overlooked the courtyard. My reflection stared back at me in the glass—tie loosened, shirt collar askew, eyes too tired for mid-afternoon.

I pulled up my inbox. Nothing yet.

But I could feel it.

The silence wasn't safety—it was a warning. A lull. Like the half-second before the wave breaks, when all the tension pulls back, dragging everything with it.

The bankruptcy was now a public record. The business trades hadn't picked it up yet, but they would soon. When it did, the headline wouldn't read: Designer Accessory Line Quietly Dissolves Amid Changing Trends.

It would read: Vérité Foundation Co-Founder Linked to Financial Collapse.

I didn't have the luxury of waiting. I grabbed my phone and hit the contact I'd flagged months before: Thatcher – PR.

He picked up on the third ring. Always professional. Always calm.

“Damian. How bad?”

I walked behind my desk and sat, the leather chair too stiff, like even the furniture didn't want to offer comfort today.

“It's not live yet,” I said. “But it's coming. I want a statement drafted.”

“Standard positioning?”

“No.” I exhaled. “If something about The Cut of Her Jib hits the trades, I want to be first in the inbox. Not last on the apology tour.”

There was a pause. A few keystrokes. Then: “Understood. What about Vérité?”

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“That’s the whole point—no connections with my real estate portfolio. Keep the foundation clean. No mention of the board, no tie-in to the Germany trip. I want a wall between them.”

“And Vanderburg?”

My jaw tightened.

Of course, he’d seen the pictures. It was a high-profile auction. Press had been everywhere. Juliette in that black dress. My hand on her back. Her smile angled toward me like we were the only two people in the damn room.

They didn’t need confirmation. Just a name to start spinning their own version of events.

“She’s a contract consultant,” I said evenly. “An art historian. Her name is Juliette Vanderburg. She’s working out of the back office while she launches her own business. No formal affiliation with Vérité.”

A pause.

Then: “She was photographed with you.”

“I know.”

“And if the story breaks?—”

“You leave her out of it,” I snapped. “No name in the press release. No photos. No suggestion that she’s tied to the foundation. She’s not the story.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Noted. Want me to brief the media response team?”

“Only if something leaks. And if it does, you know what to do.”

“Reinforce the wall between your past and the foundation. No romantic conjecture. No crossing lines.”

“Exactly. Keep it dry. Keep it clean.” I hesitated, then added, quieter, “She’s not leverage. She’s not collateral. I want her name clear.”

But this wasn’t just about Juliette, and it sure as hell wasn’t just about me.

It was about the foundation—Vérité—the one thing I’d built that felt like more than branding or spin. A mission that mattered. One that now teetered on the edge of becoming collateral damage if the narrative shifted even a degree off course.

If word got out about the bankruptcy, I could lose donor confidence.

They’d start pulling out if they thought I was reckless with money—or worse, with my personal life. Quietly at first, then all at once.

And then there was Judge Valencia—the man who’d helped me set Vérité up from the ground floor, who’d vouched for me, put his reputation behind mine when I didn’t deserve it yet. I couldn’t stomach the idea of disappointing him or making him regret his support.

I couldn’t afford a scandal. Not when so many names—not just mine—were stamped on the work we were doing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Juliette

The fertility clinic didn't smell like a clinic.

The aroma was a delightful blend of citrus water and lavender diffuser oil, creating an almost overwhelming sense of tranquility. However, I couldn't shake the feeling of being slightly judged for my second-day blowout and half a tube of concealer.

The waiting room was absurdly nice—quiet, sun-drenched, all soft neutrals and curated art that made it feel more like a boutique spa than a place where people came to interrogate their ovaries.

I signed in at the front desk and slid the clipboard into my lap. Name. Date of birth. How long had I been off birth control? I hesitated. Then wrote: One Week.

A couple was sitting two chairs over, whisper-fighting like they thought the Ficus tree between us gave them privacy. I tried not to listen—but she kept hissing phrases like “we said we'd wait” and “your mother doesn't get a vote.”

I shifted my weight and glanced around. I was the only one here alone, weirdly, which made me sit up straighter.

I hadn't told Gabrielle I made the appointment. Hadn't told Damian. And definitely hadn't mentioned it to the Coral Gables estate manager, who assumed I lived and breathed 19th-century French bronzes. “Sorry, can't evaluate your heirlooms today—I'm reevaluating my uterus,” didn't seem to be the right tone.

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The pen hovered over the box labeled Reason for Visit. But there wasn't one for 'mild existential panic and a clock I'm still not sure is ticking'. So I checked: Consultation – Fertility Evaluation

I stared at it for a second longer than necessary.

I wasn't here to make a baby. I was here to find out if I still had the pieces to even build one.

The nurse called my name, and I stood. My knees didn't buckle. My hands didn't shake. But I walked like a woman who wasn't ready to say why she was there out loud—just ready to hear it.

And maybe... ready to know what happened next.

The consultation room looked more like a boutique therapist's office than anything medical—plush chairs, an abstract painting on the wall, a table with a well-organized stack of wellness books I had zero intention of reading. Not a stirrup or sterile swab in sight. Just me, perched on the edge of a slate blue armchair, trying not to feel like I'd wandered into the wrong appointment and couldn't find the exit.

The door opened, and in walked Dr. Mariana Klein—a woman in her sixties with silver-streaked curls, tortoiseshell glasses, and the kind of energy that said she could deliver good news or bad news without flinching and then recommend a really excellent wine pairing afterward.

She smiled like we already knew each other. "Juliette Vanderburg?"

“That’s me,” I said, standing and shaking her hand.

“Have a seat. I read your file. Congratulations on finishing your PhD.” Her voice was warm, low, and easy—chamomile tea with a dry chardonnay finish.

“Thanks,” I said. “Now I’m just hoping my body hasn’t aged faster than my résumé.”

That earned me a smirk from her. “Well, that’s what we’re here to find out.”

She opened my chart and tapped a pen against the tablet screen.

“First things first,” she said, scanning. “You’ve been on birth control pills. You mentioned this morning you took your last one seven days ago?”

“Correct,” I said. “I’ve been on them for years.”

“Then we’ll need to wait three to four weeks before we run full diagnostics. That includes hormone panels, ovarian reserve markers, and ultrasounds.”

I blinked. “That long?”

“It’s not ideal,” she said. “But we need a clean hormonal slate. Otherwise, the results could be misleading. I know it feels like wasted time, but trust me—it’s better than chasing inaccurate data.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay. Just didn’t expect that part.”

“No one ever does,” she said gently. “But it gives us a window to talk about next steps. If it turns out you do need assistance, I like my patients to understand their options early.”

“Lay it on me,” I said. “What does modern fertility look like?”

“Modern fertility,” she said with a wry smile, “looks a lot like an upscale boutique with a genetics lab in the back. If we determine natural conception isn’t likely—or isn’t ideal based on your goals—then IVF is the next step. And if you don’t have a male partner, or don’t want one involved, we’ll look at sperm donation.”

I tried to nod like her words weren’t a punch in the chest.

“There are two paths,” she continued. “Anonymous donor or known donor. Anonymous is our most common route. You choose from a secure, medically screened database. Donors are required to pass genetic testing, STI panels, psychological screenings—some even submit childhood photos or writing samples.”

“That’s... thorough.”

“It has to be. Some are grad students. Some are engineers. Some are married men doing it on the side for the money, or because they think it’s their contribution to humanity.” She said it without judgment. Just facts.

“And the known donor route?” I asked.

She folded her hands. “Legally complicated. If you ask someone you know, we require separate legal counsel, a written agreement, and psychiatric clearance for both parties. There are long-term emotional and custodial implications to consider.”

I swallowed. “So... either way, it’s not exactly a rom-com montage.”

“No,” she said, “but it’s yours. And that’s what matters.”

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I didn't have anything clever to say to that. Because it was... a lot. All of it. The science, the legal stuff, the sobering realization that creating a family could come down to a few filters and a digital login.

Apparently, modern motherhood came with a menu. You just had to choose the vintage.

I didn't open the catalog at the clinic. Dr. Klein had handed me the access code at the end of the appointment with a reassuring smile, the kind you give someone before you push them into traffic.

"No pressure," she'd said. "Browse if you're curious. You don't have to make any decisions now. You don't even have your testing done yet. This is just to give you an idea of your options if you need to go the IVF route."

But of course, once I got home and kicked off my sandals, the curiosity festered.

The code was still scribbled on the back of a referral form in my bag. I tried to ignore it. Made tea. Watered the herbs. Checked my email.

And still, it sat there. Tucked between "New Client Inquiry—Coral Gables Estate" and a flash sale alert from a boutique I hadn't shopped at since grad school.

I pulled it out. Logged in.

Welcome to LifeTree Genetics.

A few clicks later, the screen filled with neatly cropped childhood photos and bio blurbs in matching fonts that looked like they'd been designed by someone who once sold furniture for Restoration Hardware.

Donor 19742: "I'm passionate about languages and literature. I want to help others start families with hope and intention."

Donor 21105: "I believe kindness is inherited."

Donor 19863: photo unavailable— but his "personal essay" was clearly written by ChatGPT and a sugar crash.

I scrolled.

And then I stopped.

Donor 19284.

The writing sample hit first—sharp, clever, bordering on smug.

"Legacy isn't built by accident. I believe in clarity, curiosity, and continuity. My favorite hobby is yachting."

My stomach flipped.

I skimmed the rest. University of Miami undergrad. Business background. Fluent in French and German. Athletic. Tall.

I blinked at the childhood photo—light hair, a grin that was all mischief and charm, even at six years old. It was blurry, a little too perfect. But I'd seen that exact brand of smirk... in my pool. In my bed. In my kitchen, pouring wine like he was born to

own the place.

Oh my God.

I backed out of the profile. Scrolled forward. Then back.

Donor 19284.

No name. No location. Just the kind of data that looked sterile on the page but hit like a sucker punch when you realized who it belonged to.

“For the love of God...”

I dropped the phone on the counter and stared at the ceiling, like the drywall had answers.

And then—because it was the only sane response—I started laughing.

Low at first. Then louder. Messy, hysterical, tears-pricking-the-corner-of-my-eyes kind of laughter. I said out loud to the room. “Of course, Damian Sinclair would try to repopulate the planet from a cryogenic lab.”

I swiped the screen back on, stared at the profile one more time, and let the absurdity settle.

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I wasn't even mad. I was intrigued—that was a problem.

I spotted Gabrielle's car in the garage, and Anthony's was conspicuously absent. Perfect.

I thumbed out a quick text.

Juliette: Come over. I need to talk. Bring Julian. Don't bring judgment.

She replied two seconds later:

Gabrielle: Are you dying? Or just overly dramatic again?

Juliette: Not dying. Just... medically unsettled.

Gabrielle: Oh, Jesus. On my way.

Five minutes later, she walked into my guesthouse like she owned it, baby on her hip and eyebrows already raised.

Julian gave me a gummy smile and reached for my necklace. Gabrielle just tilted her head.

“Should I be worried?”

“Only if you believe in fate, irony, and karmic sperm banks,” I said, locking the door behind her.

She blinked. “You’re gonna have to run that sentence back.”

I handed her a glass of wine and took a long sip from mine. “You have to swear not to tell Anthony. Or anyone. I mean it, Gabby. I’ll know if you do. I’ll feel it in the twin portal.”

She smirked. “Cross my ovaries. Now, tell me what’s going on.”

I let the words come out in order—first the appointment, the doctor, the annoying hormone wait. The delay in testing. The doctor’s clinical voice. The legal disclaimers.

Gabrielle listened closely, her face carefully still.

“And then,” I said, voice lowering, “I logged into the donor catalog.”

She set down her wine. “You what?”

“I wasn’t going to. I was just... curious. Killing time. You know me—I emotionally spiral through research.”

“And?”

I took another sip. “I found someone. A Miami Hurricane. Fluent in French and German. Business background. Childhood photo that looked like his PR team airbrushed it. Favorite hobby?” I paused. “Yachting.”

Gabrielle’s mouth opened.

I nodded.

She whispered, “You think it’s Damian?”

“I don’t think,” I said. “I know.”

She blinked again, slower this time. “You’re sure?”

“I’d bet my vintage Chanel bag and a month of orgasms on it.”

She let out a strangled noise. “Why would a man like Damian donate sperm?”

“I asked myself the same thing,” I said, setting down my glass. “And then I laughed. Out loud. Because it’s so him, reproduce without responsibility? Spread his legacy through a cryogenic filing cabinet? Honestly, it’s probably in his will.”

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Gabrielle snorted. “Of course, he’d want his lineage floating in a temperature-controlled vault.”

“Exactly.” I sat down hard on the couch. “I just... I wasn’t ready for that. Seeing him in that context. It’s clinical, but it felt... intimate.”

We were both quiet for a second. Julian mumbled something in toddler-ese and reached for his mom’s watch.

Gabrielle looked at me seriously. “So... do you know what you’re going to do?”

I stared out the window. The sun was low as the palm fronds swayed like they didn’t have a care in the world.

“No,” I said slowly. “I don’t. I’m not even sure what the question is yet.”

She sat beside me, her hand warm as it wrapped around mine. “Then don’t rush the answer.”

I nodded, my eyes still on the breeze, still trying to quiet the noise in my chest. “I just didn’t expect to find him... there. I thought I was walking into the future alone. But now he’s... already part of it. In the most Sinclair way possible.”

Gabrielle was quiet for a beat. Then she gave me a side-eye smirk. “So this is my fault?”

“Oh, completely,” I said, turning toward her. “You’re the one who told me to get

checked out. You're the one who dragged our inherited mystery uterus into the conversation. If I end up pregnant by accident through a sperm bank that includes my billionaire situationship? That's on you."

She laughed, full and loud. "Please. If we're assigning blame, we both know who really deserves it."

We said it at the same time: "Mom."

Gabrielle snorted. "God, she would hate this conversation."

"Which is exactly why we're having it."

We both laughed, the kind of laugh that releases more than it adds, and I let my head rest briefly against her shoulder. Julian babbled something in his toddler dialect and tossed a pacifier under my coffee table like it had personally offended him.

"You're gonna be fine," Gabrielle said.

I wasn't sure if she meant about Damian, or fertility, or the whole mess of it—but I nodded anyway. "Yeah. I will."

Eventually.

But in the meantime, at least I had wine.

And someone else to blame.

CHAPTER NINE

Damian

A Few Weeks Later

The logistics binder lay open in front of me—passport copies, customs declarations, chain of custody documentation for the Kandinsky. Clean. Complete. Ready for handoff.

I ran my thumb along the edge of the folder and flipped to the final page again. Everything checked out. The curator in Baden-Baden had confirmed receipt of our itinerary, and the museum's attorney had pre-signed the export clearance. The chain was tight. Airtight.

It had to be.

I sat back, let out a slow breath, and reached for my coffee—lukewarm now, but still drinkable. The office around me was quiet in that mid-afternoon way that suggested the workday wasn't over, but no one wanted to admit it.

My laptop dinged.

Subject:EARLY MENTION— Cut of Her Jib

Thatcher. My PR guy. I clicked.

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“A boutique fashion blog ran a vague but pointed line about the company’s recent ‘radio silence.’ No names, no bankruptcy keywords—yet. But the editor tagged an industry investor on Twitter about ‘when things unravel quietly.’ We’re not viral. But someone’s sniffing. It’s moving.”

I read it twice.

This wasn’t the fire. This was the smoke.

I clenched my jaw and clicked reply.

Prepare a neutral response. Timeline only. No speculation. No names. Do not release anything unless I call it.

I stared at the screen, cursor blinking like it knew something I didn’t. My reflection hovered faintly in the black border of the screen—shirt slightly wrinkled, collar undone, shadows under my eyes that hadn’t been there a few weeks ago.

I opened a second tab. Typed slowly.

To:Thatcher

Subject:Vérité

If the leak spreads—containment only. No interviews. No spin. Keep the foundation clean. And keep Juliette’s name out of it. Entirely. She’s not involved. Don’t let them make her collateral damage. This one’s not just optics. It matters.

Then I hit send.

The screen confirmed it—message delivered—but the tension didn't leave. Not even close.

I looked down at the binder again, at the perfectly organized itinerary. My finger tapped the edge of the page in time with the muted throb at my temple. Everything about Germany was ready. Every form, every checkpoint, every transfer of responsibility.

Except the part that couldn't be documented—except the fallout if the leak spread fast and dragged Vérité down with it.

I wasn't sure what that would do to the board. Or to her. But I knew one thing. It wouldn't spell disaster.

I started walking, clearing my head after the email, the spinning headlines I could feel building just beyond the reach of a Google alert. I didn't want to sit around my office like some restless case study in poor decision-making, so I moved. I went past the admin wing, past the empty exhibition space, until I ended up near the back, where we kept the crates, gloves, archival wrapping, and rolled canvas tubes labeled in thick black marker.

And there she was.

Juliette.

In a white blouse rolled to her elbows, fitted jeans dusted with foam residue, and hair twisted into one of those no-nonsense buns that still made me want to undo it with my teeth.

She was standing beside the Kandinsky—resting carefully on the cushioned easel. A pair of white cotton gloves stretched over her hands as she examined the lower corner for micro-cracking.

She didn't notice me at first.

I watched the way she leaned in—careful, reverent, like the painting was breathing. And then she smiled, just slightly.

Not for me. For the art.

“Do you always flirt with the modernists?” I asked finally.

She turned, grinning over her shoulder. “Only the dead ones. Less trouble.”

I stepped inside, grabbed a pair of gloves from the shelf, and joined her.

“This one's ready,” she said. “But the crate needs double foam. Whoever packed the Prague handoff used single-layer corrugate. I don't want any vibration damage.”

“You just want an excuse to manhandle custom shipping foam.”

She shrugged. “Guilty.”

We lifted the piece together—slow, even, the kind of movement that only happens when both people are in sync. I felt the slight tremble of her grip and matched it. She didn't flinch. Neither did I.

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Juliette reached for the second sheet of foam, and I held it in place while she anchored the corners with tape. We worked in near silence—glove-smooth rustle, soft creak of wood under pressure, the scent of fresh pine and archival adhesive lingering in the air.

We didn't need to talk. We were already saying it. About trust. About rhythm. About the kind of shared respect you couldn't fake—not for the work, and not for each other.

“You know,” she said as we secured the final side panel, “I used to think provenance was the least sexy part of a painting.”

“And now?”

She looked up. Smirked. “Now it's tied with shipping logistics.”

I laughed—quiet but real. For a minute, I forgot the press. I forgot the leak. I forgot everything except the woman in front of me, the masterpiece between us, and the crate that would carry both history and meaning across the ocean.

We screwed down the lid, side by side. And I couldn't help but wonder...

What else might we build if we kept working like this?

An hour later, she tapped lightly on the edge of my office door, knuckles brushing the frame like she was trying not to interrupt.

But she did. Completely.

Juliette stood there in a travel-black sleek blazer, a soft blouse the color of white wine, slim-fit pants, and ankle boots. Hair twisted up with just enough intention to make it look accidental. Professional, polished. Sharp as hell.

“I’ve got my passport, travel certs, customs docs, and insurance copies,” she said, grinning and holding up a slim leather folder. “Figured I’d drop them off before I head home to do some last-minute packing.”

I leaned back in my chair, giving her a smile I’d perfected in far less ethical boardrooms. “You always bring paperwork looking this sexy?”

She arched a brow but didn’t smile. “Only when international art crime is involved.”

Touché.

She crossed the room with the same grounded grace she carried everywhere now. Not just confidence—ownership. She handed me the folder, then lingered for a beat. Not long enough to be an invitation. Just long enough to say: this is business.

“Bringing anything else for the flight?” I asked, setting the folder down.

“My appraisal notes,” she said. “The Coral Gables estate sent over two more trunks of records. I figured I’d skim a few pages before we crash out mid-flight.”

I smirked. “Ambitious, considering we’re flying through the night and landing early afternoon their time.”

She shrugged, casual but sharp. “It helps me sleep. Reading provenance reports is like a lullaby if you do it long enough.”

Of course it was. While I'd be half-distracted by the way she curled into the seat or the way her lips pursed when she was focused, she'd be flipping through paperwork like it was the opening chapter of a mystery novel.

I tried to keep my tone easy. "Need a second pair of eyes?"

"I'm good."

She wasn't dismissive. Not cold.

Just... capable. Self-contained. The kind of woman who didn't wait to be rescued or handed a plan.

Juliette turned toward the door, all polished efficiency.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard—Germany on my screen, something messier lingering in my mind.

And none of it had a clean paper trail.

Tell her. Say it now. The leak's already started. She deserves to know what she's flying into.

Instead, I opened my laptop and pulled up the email from Baden-Baden. The customs contact had replied with the import validation for the Kandinsky. The message was short, clipped, formal—very German.

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Juliette glanced back just once before leaving. “I’ll see you at the hangar. Eight sharp.”

I nodded. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

She didn’t smile this time. She just walked back to her office.

The email loaded. And the silence she left behind took up far more space than it should’ve.

The sky had dropped low when I stepped to the tall office windows. From there, I had a clear view of the sidewalk, which curved out toward the parking lot. The glass caught the last smear of sunset as it fell across the bay like someone had brushed orange and rosewater onto a steel-blue canvas.

Juliette stepped out of the building with her tote over one shoulder and her phone in hand, the corner of a document peeking from her folder like it was too important to stay tucked away. She moved with the kind of quiet purpose that didn’t need an audience.

She didn’t look back.

Didn’t need to. She’d already said yes—to the trip, to me... or at least the version of me I’d let her see.

And I wasn’t sure how long that would last.

I leaned a hand against the window frame, fingers splayed. From this angle, I could still see the subtle slope of her shoulders, the confident sway of her hips. She'd become so much a part of my day-to-day that I hadn't noticed when she started threading herself into the parts of me I didn't usually share. The pieces I couldn't explain away with charm or credentials.

She was part of this trip. Part of this story. But I hadn't let her be part of the truth, and the truth was coming. With headlines. With judgment. With the kind of fallout I didn't know how to control anymore.

If it burned Vérité to the ground, I'd survive. Rebuild.

But if it burned her faith in me—if it made her see me as just another entitled billionaire playing at legacy while hiding the smoke from my last disaster? I wasn't sure how I'd get through that.

My chest tightened. I pressed my palm flat against the glass, as if I could hold her there for just one more second.

But Juliette kept walking. Hair catching the breeze. Keys swinging casually in her hand. She climbed into her car, started the engine, and drove away—tail lights blinking once, then disappearing into the dusk.

I stayed at the window long after she was gone. Waiting for something I couldn't name, knowing, deep down, that I might not be able to keep her.

Not if she learned everything.

Not if she finally saw what was already cracking beneath the surface.

CHAPTER TEN

Juliette

The private terminal wasn't busy, but the energy still buzzed the way it always did before an international flight—subdued voices, expensive watches flashing under designer cuffs, luggage gliding smoothly across marble floors.

I tightened my grip on my carry-on and followed the sleek attendant who greeted me at the check-in desk.

“Ms. Vanderburg, welcome aboard,” she said with a practiced smile. “You’re first to arrive.”

Naturally.

We crossed the tarmac to the jet—sleek, polished, and just obnoxious enough to say yes, we run with billionaires, but we’re discreet about it. The first thing I saw when I stepped inside wasn't the butter-soft leather seats or the silver service cart lined with glassware. It was the crate.

The Kandinsky.

I paused. It sat secured along the interior wall, strapped in a custom carrier, the wood reinforced, and the seals already checked twice by the foundation's logistics guy this morning.

But still.

I walked over, lightly ran my hand across the crate's side, feeling the faint ridges of the serial stamps. I double-checked the fastenings because no matter how careful they'd been, it was my name now, too—on the chain of custody.

Behind me, I heard footfalls.

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I turned just as Damian boarded—casual in jeans and a sport coat, looking infuriatingly awake for someone about to spend nine hours in the air. His duffel was slung over one shoulder, sunglasses pushed into his hair, and he was already flashing that Sinclair smirk that made rational women misplace their IQ points.

“Are the goods secure?” he asked, nodding at the crate.

I rolled my eyes. “Unless you plan on somersaulting this plane onto the tarmac, it’s not going anywhere.”

He dropped his bag into the seat opposite mine. “Good. I’d hate to have to break into a German prison to explain a missing Kandinsky.”

“Don’t joke,” I muttered, double-checking the tie-downs one more time. “Customs paperwork only buys us so much forgiveness.”

He watched me work for a moment, leaning one shoulder against the nearest seat, and I could feel his gaze like a low whisper across my skin.

Finally satisfied, I tugged my blazer straight and turned to face him.

“Ready?” I asked.

He grinned. “Born ready.”

The flight attendant reappeared with a tray of champagne flutes, but I waved her off. Damian accepted one because, of course, he did.

We settled into our seats—mine facing slightly away from his because, frankly, I needed the distance tonight.

As the jet taxied, I let my fingers skim over the corners of my notes folder, the Coral Gables estate records tucked neatly inside. Work. Focus. Professionalism. I was here for a job.

Not for him.

Not for the way his hand flexed around the stem of the glass or the way he loosened his collar when he thought I wasn't looking.

The jet began its climb, engines vibrating beneath the carpeted cabin floor. I stole one last glance at the crate secured near the wall. Then another glance at the man stretched casually in his seat across from me. Neither one of them belonged to me, but tonight, for a little while, maybe I could pretend they did.

The first hour passed in that dreamy, pressurized haze that only comes from cruising thirty-five thousand feet above a world that keeps turning without you.

Damian had his laptop open, skimming emails he clearly wasn't reading. I had my appraisal notes out, the familiar rhythm of work steadying me more than the champagne I hadn't touched.

Across the aisle, the flight attendant approached again, polite but curious, her gaze flickering toward the large secured crate bolted near the galley.

"If you don't mind my asking," she said, keeping her voice low and professional, "what's in the crate?"

I smiled, setting my pen down. "A painting. Vasily Kandinsky."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. “An original?”

“Original, yes. Stolen during the Nazi regime,” I explained. “It’s being returned to a museum in Baden-Baden. Near where the family who originally owned it lived before the war.”

She glanced at the crate again, her expression softening. “That’s... incredible.”

“It is,” I said quietly. “A lot of pieces from that era never make it home.”

Damian closed his laptop and leaned back in his seat, watching me now instead of his inbox.

The flight attendant thanked me, adjusted the strap on the crate for good measure, and left us alone again.

The whir of the engines filled the space between us, steady and private.

I looked down at my papers, tried to focus on the handwritten provenance notes, but I could feel him watching me.

Always watching.

Finally, I set the folder aside. I cleared my throat, casually—too casually. “So,” I said, stretching my legs out in front of me. “I should probably tell you... I’m off the pill.”

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I didn't look at him at first. I just let the words hang there, light and heavy all at once.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him choke slightly on his champagne.

Good.

When I finally turned to face him, he was sitting up straighter, glass forgotten on the tray beside him, his brows drawn together like he wasn't sure he'd heard me correctly.

"You're... what?"

I shrugged one shoulder, pretending it was no big deal. "I went to the fertility specialist. Figured it was time to get a baseline. You know. Options."

Damian stared at me, the air between us thinning into something sharp.

"No big reveal planned," I added, flipping the top page of my notes idly. "Just needed to get the hormones cleared before they can run proper tests."

His jaw flexed once, tight. "You're serious about this," he said quietly.

"Serious enough to show up at a clinic before ten in the morning without caffeine or hope." I smiled when I said it. Joking. Easy. But underneath, my heart knocked against my ribs a little harder.

The jet hummed forward, a beautiful sunset unfurling beyond the windows.

Damian leaned his head back against the seat, watching me through half-lidded eyes.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked eventually. “Pick a donor? Roll some dice?”

I pulled in a deep breath. Then, because we were here—adrift between time zones, between choices—I said it: “I haven’t picked anyone yet.” I paused, tasting the question before asking it. “Would you ever consider it?”

His gaze sharpened instantly.

“Consider what?”

I smiled, but it wasn’t playful. Not this time.

“Donating. Being... involved.” I looked down at my notes, then back up. “Helping someone you trust. No strings. No expectations.”

The silence that followed was so thick, so absolute, I thought for a second maybe the engines had gone silent too.

He didn’t move. Didn’t blink.

If he said no, if he laughed, if he made some flippant joke, I would survive it.

I wasn’t asking for love. I wasn’t even asking for permanence. Just... something honest. Something real.

Damian rubbed the back of his neck like the words itched under his skin. For a moment, I swore I saw something flicker in his eyes. Something that wasn’t fear. Something that wasn’t casual. But whatever it was, he buried it before it could surface.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, looking over at me like I was a puzzle he hadn't decided if he wanted to solve or break apart. "That's a hell of a thing to ask on a private flight," he muttered.

I grinned, even though my chest was tight. "Hey, if the conversation gets too heavy, at least we're flying with a full bar and no exits."

Damian exhaled, low and ragged.

I didn't push.

I just picked up my notes again, giving him the out he needed, and started underlining a few lines I'd already memorized. Beyond my glasses, I could still feel his gaze on me.

Watching.

Damian stretched his legs out under the table, his bare ankle brushing mine by accident—or maybe not. The cabin lights had been dimmed to a soft, amber glow, and the low hum of the engines made everything feel a little detached from reality. Cozy. Suspended. Dangerous.

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He toyed with his wine glass for a second, staring into it like he thought it might give him better words.

Then he cleared his throat. “Why IVF?”

The question was soft. Not judgmental. But careful.

I blinked, caught off guard. “Why not?” I tossed back casually, but even I could hear the thinness in my voice.

Damian didn’t look away. “You just always seemed...” He trailed off, searching. “You know. Life of the party. Zero plans beyond the next art gala or tequila shot until recently, with your own art appraisal business.”

I leaned back in my seat, stretching slightly, letting the movement give me time to think.

He wasn’t wrong. Not completely.

“I can be both,” I said lightly. “The girl who wants to dance on a yacht at midnight... and the woman who maybe, someday, wants a kid to share her life with.”

He frowned a little. Not disapproving—just confused. “So... why now?”

I tapped my finger against the rim of my glass. “Gabrielle. She’s been trying for another baby. It’s... complicated... the possible medical issues. Made me realize perhaps I’m not invincible either, especially since we are twins.”

He nodded slowly, absorbing that. His thumb traced the stem of his glass, restless.

“And you don’t want to do it the... conventional way?” His mouth quirked, like he hated how prudish he sounded.

I gave a short, dry laugh. “What? Let some guy knock me up and disappear after brunch?”

His mouth kicked into a reluctant smile, but there was tension in his shoulders now. As if he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure he had the right.

“I’m not opposed to love or marriage if it ever happens,” I said. “But I’m not betting my biology on a maybe.” I didn’t add, especially now, after seeing the clinic’s donor catalogue.

He shifted, drumming his fingers lightly against the leather tabletop. “And you haven’t picked a donor yet?”

I shook my head. “Still looking.” Still wondering if it would be wrong or right to pick the one whose childhood photo made my heart catch.

Still wondering if it was him.

Damian exhaled slowly, and the sound made my skin prickle. He wasn’t upset. Not exactly. But he was unsettled. I could feel it vibrating between us, low and warm.

“I don’t have to decide tonight, do I?” he asked, and the way he said it—half teasing, half serious—made my throat tighten.

I smiled and tipped my glass toward him. “Good news. I haven’t even had the tests yet. Technically, I don’t even know if I need a donor.”

His shoulders loosened just a fraction, but that small, unreadable smile stayed.

“Besides,” I added, swirling the wine in my glass. “If I had to decide tonight, I’d have to consult my magic eight ball. And I left it in my other purse.”

He huffed out a short laugh, shaking his head like he wasn’t sure if he was amused or exasperated.

The moment lightened—but not completely. Not where it counted.

Because the whole time he was sitting there, trying to play it cool, part of me was thinking—You could just ask him if it was indeed him in the donor catalogue. Right here. Right now.

But part of me was screaming—No. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

The plane banked slightly, the stars outside shifting across the windows in a slow, dizzy sprawl toward some invisible horizon.

I looked at him—beautiful, complicated, maddening Damian—and wondered if either of us would be the same when we landed.

The engines’ whirl deepened, and somewhere over the Atlantic, the cabin lights dimmed to a low, soft gold.

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I shifted in my seat, tugging the thin blanket up over my legs, trying not to think about what came next—Germany, the handoff, the future I hadn't mapped yet.

Beside me, Damian stretched his legs out, his hand brushing lightly against mine as he adjusted his seat.

He didn't move it. Didn't pull away.

Neither did I.

The warmth of his fingers against my skin was small. Barely a touch. But it buzzed louder than any turbulence, louder than the questions we weren't asking.

Eventually, his breathing evened out, the rhythm of it slow and steady. Sleep found him easily, the way it always seemed to.

I stayed awake longer, staring at the jet's ceiling, feeling his hand's steady pulse against mine. Wondering if some part of me already knew—when we landed, it wouldn't just be Germany waiting. It would be everything we weren't ready to say yet. And maybe... it always had been.

I closed my eyes, willing my mind to still.

Just as I started to drift, I heard it—faint, barely more than a breath—"Jules..."

My heart skidded against my ribs. I stayed still, frozen in the dark, pretending not to hear him. Pretending it didn't matter. But it did. It mattered more than I wanted to

admit.

I tightened my fingers slightly against his, anchoring myself to the moment.

To him.

The jet sailed steadily through the night sky, chasing a sunrise neither of us was ready for.

And somewhere between dreams and denial, Damian Sinclair said my name like it was the only thing he trusted.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damian

“Willkommen to Baden-Baden,” the flight attendant said over the cabin speakers, her voice smooth and accented. “The city of baths, gardens, and rest. Local time is just past four in the afternoon. Thank you for flying with us.”

The jet wheels touched down with a muted thud, rattling all the way through my chest.

Germany.

Baden-Baden. A town so proud of its hot springs, they named it twice.

Somehow, despite the leaks, the half-truths, and the thousand things I hadn’t said, I still had Juliette sitting beside me. She smoothed her jacket, her hair a little messy from the long flight, but made it look deliberate, professional, effortless, and untouchable.

The Kandinsky sat secured at the front, cradled like a crown jewel awaiting coronation. The museum had insisted on a personal handoff—no third-party couriers, no freight handlers. Just trust, reputation, and a pair of passports with clean histories.

The ramp lowered with a low mechanical hum. A rush of crisp air flooded the cabin, carrying the faint scent of wet stone and spring grass.

Juliette unbuckled her seatbelt, already reaching for the provenance packet and double-checking the seals on the crate. No hesitation. No nerves. Just muscle memory and focus.

I wanted to kiss her for it.

Instead, I grabbed my jacket and followed her into the cool German afternoon.

Waiting at the edge of the tarmac was a black Sprinter van marked with the discreet insignia of the Baden-Baden Regional Museum. Two curators and a registrar stood beside it, their smiles warm but cautious.

Juliette moved first, offering her hand with easy confidence. She slipped into fluent German like it was her first language. She didn't need prompting—she never did.

I followed her lead, my own German polished enough to keep pace as we moved through the protocols: seal inspection, identity confirmation, chain of custody signatures.

Everything clocked along with mechanical precision, and I felt something close to steady for the first time in days.

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Juliette crouched to double-check the crate's base fastenings before the museum staff lifted it into the van. She jotted a few notes onto the transfer form, then handed it to me with a raised eyebrow like, Sign, Sinclair. Stop gawking.

I smirked and signed.

We watched the van pull away, taillights blinking once before disappearing around the curve of the museum's private drive. A weight should have lifted from my chest. Instead, tension tightened deeper beneath my ribs, coiling slowly and with certainty.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and turned to her.

"That," I said, "was a damn fine delivery."

Juliette gave me a proud, almost mischievous smile. "We make a good team."

The words hit harder than they should have. I wanted to believe it was just about the art. Just a job well done. But standing there with her, laughing under the gray German sky, the crate safely handed off, I realized it wasn't pride filling my chest. It was something bigger. Heavier.

Something dangerously close to hope.

We made our way toward the museum's administrative wing for a short debrief before heading to the hotel. Somewhere deep down, I knew the easy part was over. Now came the fall.

The courtyard outside the museum was too quiet.

I should've noticed it sooner—the slight tension in the staff's shoulders, the way our private chauffeur subtly straightened at the curb.

I adjusted the strap of my bag and motioned for Juliette to stay close.

We were halfway to the car when I spotted him. Plain blazer. Crooked press badge. Trying way too hard to look casual.

“Mr. Sinclair!” he called out, jogging a few steps forward. His German was polished but carried a faint American slant. “A quick question, sir—can you comment on the rumors about The Cut of Her Jib's bankruptcy proceedings?”

Juliette stiffened beside me.

I didn't break stride. “No comment,” I said smoothly, not even glancing his way. We reached the car, and I opened Juliette's door. She didn't get in. Instead, she leaned casually against the frame, her eyebrow lifting high. “What's this about The Cut of Her Jib?” she asked, voice light but far too sharp to miss.

I gave her the same shrug I'd mastered at every board meeting where someone asked too many questions. “Just a side business,” I said. “Fashion stuff. Scarves. Fragrance. Minimalist junk. It's not important.”

Juliette blinked once.

Then, deliberately, she tugged at the silk scarf knotted at her throat. The label fluttered out: Cut of Her Jib, stitched in crisp black script. She smiled sweetly, holding the tag between two fingers like evidence.

“Side business?” she said, all razor-edged amusement.

“Micro-enterprise,” I deadpanned, allowing the grin to rest lazily on my face even as my chest tightened.

She studied me for a long second. I couldn’t tell if she was buying it or storing it for later. Probably both. Then, without a word, she slid into the car, tucking the scarf neatly into her jacket.

I exhaled through my nose and climbed in after her.

The engine started, and Baden-Baden’s cobblestone streets blurred past in a watercolor of old stone and copper roofs.

Handled. I told myself. Contained.

But I knew better. The crack was already running, and it was headed straight for us.

The ride to the hotel was quieter than I liked. Juliette wasn’t angry. Not openly. She was something worse: thoughtful. Detached. As if she were building a case in her head.

I leaned forward and spoke to the driver in German, keeping my tone easy. “Could you stop at the next Apotheke?”

The driver nodded, turning down a narrow street lined with flower boxes and shuttered shops.

Juliette gave me a sideways glance. “Headache?”

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“Long day,” I said, flashing a grin I didn’t feel.

She narrowed her eyes but didn’t press. She went back to scrolling her phone, one heel kicked lazily against the edge of the seat.

We slowed in front of a small pharmacy, its whitewashed walls and a green cross blinking faintly overhead. I slipped out quickly, pulling my jacket tightly against the early evening chill. Inside, the place smelled like antiseptic and mint. I grabbed the Advil easily enough.

The condoms were less graceful.

They were crammed between baby wipes and toothbrushes, like the universe was playing a joke. I snagged a box without overthinking it, tossing it onto the counter without ceremony.

The cashier didn’t blink. At least someone was having a normal day.

Bag tucked discreetly into my jacket pocket, I returned to the car. Juliette raised a brow. “Painkiller secured?”

I held up the Advil bottle like a trophy. “Wouldn’t want you thinking I’m grumpy without cause.”

She smirked. “You’re grumpy with cause.”

I shrugged, stretching one arm along the seat behind her, not quite touching but close

enough to feel the static tension crackling between us.

“Don’t worry,” I said low. “I came prepared.”

Her eyes flared for half a heartbeat before she looked back out the window.

Small wins.

I’d take every one I could get.

The hotel was a grand stone structure perched just beyond the old town. Elegant without being gaudy. Timeless. Baden-Baden shimmered behind it: rolling vineyards, terra-cotta roofs, river mist hanging low over the hills.

I barely noticed.

I was too busy watching Juliette slide out of the car, adjust her carry-on, and flash the porter a polite, confident smile.

She was independent. Dangerous. Lethal to every last thread of restraint I had left.

The marble lobby was silent except for the soft murmur of water over a fountain.

The concierge smiled tightly as he tapped at his screen.

“There appears to be a mix-up,” he said in English. “You were both upgraded to our executive suite. Two bedrooms. Shared living space.”

I opened my mouth—to say what, I wasn’t even sure—but Juliette beat me to it.

“That’s fine,” she said easily. “We’re traveling together.”

I signed the slip with a flick of my wrist, without giving her a chance to change her mind. I stood there a moment too long, watching her, knowing exactly what I was walking into, and knowing I'd follow her anyway.

Every damn time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Juliette

The hotel door clicked shut behind us with a soft, definitive sound. Thick carpet muted the steps we barely took inside, as if the room itself knew too much about tension and wasn't about to interrupt it. I set my bag down carefully on the nearest chair, smoothing my palms against my slacks as if that could erase the electricity vibrating under my skin.

Damian tossed his jacket across the armrest without ceremony. He looked rumpled, tired, and maddeningly good—like every bad idea I'd ever wanted to make twice. For a long second, neither of us moved. Just breathing. Waiting.

The view from the balcony stretched out behind him—endless rows of vineyard hills dusted silver by the moonlight, yet I barely glanced at it. I couldn't look away from him.

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“So,” I said, breaking the quiet before it broke me. “Still grumpy?”

He smiled — slow and lethal, the kind that belonged behind a locked door. “Less grumpy. More... opportunistic.”

My mouth curved. “Opportunistic, how?”

He turned and pulled something from his jacket pocket and turned to me. The crinkle of a small pharmacy bag made my heart skip before my brain could catch up. Damian tipped its contents into his hands and closed his fists. Then held them out toward me, like a magician about to force a card.

“Pick a hand,” he said, his voice a shade rougher than it had been a moment ago.

I laughed, low and disbelieving. “You are unbelievable.”

“Not denying it.” His grin deepened. “Pick.”

I hesitated—deliberately—dragging my gaze from one of his hands to the other. The air between us stretched tight, electric. Finally, I tapped his right hand with one finger. He opened it slowly, palm up. A small, silver square gleamed in the soft light.

Condom.

My pulse kicked once, hard. Damian’s gaze caught mine, steady, direct, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

“And if I’d picked the other?” I asked, even though I already knew.

He tossed the bottle of Advil onto the coffee table behind him without looking. “Then I would’ve used my mouth,” he said, voice rough against my ear. “My hands. I would’ve made you come until you forgot we ever had a choice to make. Why tempt fate?” His gaze dragged over my mouth, my throat, then lower. “But I’m not feeling particularly patient tonight.”

Heat coiled deep in my belly.

I plucked the condom from his palm without breaking eye contact, slipped it into the back pocket of my slacks, and turned my back on him deliberately—a dare—as I shrugged out of my blazer and laid it over the armchair.

Behind me, Damian’s breath caught.

I toed off my shoes slowly, feeling the thick carpet under my bare feet, the pull of his gaze dragging over every inch of skin I uncovered. When I turned back around, he was still standing there, looking at me like he was starving.

For a second, neither of us moved. Then he crossed the distance between us in two strides, his hands sliding up my arms, his fingers threading into my hair as he tipped my face up to his.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmured, even as his thumb stroked the edge of my jaw.

I didn’t. I wouldn’t. Instead, I rose onto my toes and kissed him—hard, hungry, the kind of kiss that rewrote everything we hadn’t said today and everything we were about to say with our bodies.

Damian’s hands tightened. Mine pulled at his shirt. Control? We shattered it between

us like glass. Tonight wasn't about patience. It was about claiming something we'd both been pretending we didn't want as badly as we did.

And God help me, I wanted all of it.

I laughed under my breath, the kind of laugh you make when your heart's already pounding in your throat and you know you're about five seconds from doing something reckless, and loving every second of it.

God, he was beautiful. Not polished. Not pretty. Raw. Real.

Damian was dangerous in a way that had nothing to do with money and everything to do with the way he looked at me like I was the only thing in the room worth wanting.

I let my hands fall to my sides, and his fingers found the first button at my collar. He grazed my skin as he worked his way down. Each brush of his knuckles against my ribs made me shiver.

When my blouse parted, he pushed it from my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor without ceremony. His mouth found the curve of my neck, dragging heat down my spine.

"You're still wearing too much," he murmured against my skin.

"So are you," I breathed.

I felt the weight of it in my back pocket—the condom I'd tucked there minutes ago like it was some kind of secret promise. The decision had already been made. A line I was more than willing to cross.

Damian's gaze dropped to my hips, lingering like he could feel it too. For a second,

neither of us moved. Then I reached behind me, slow and deliberate, and slid it out. The foil packet crinkled between my fingers.

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Damian's jaw flexed once. His hands tightened into fists at his sides. "Still sure?" he asked, voice a little rougher now. As if hoping I'd say no. As if daring me to say yes.

I didn't answer. I didn't need to.

Instead, I stepped into his space, rose onto my toes, and kissed him—soft at first, then harder when he groaned low in his throat and grabbed my hips like he couldn't stand not touching me another second.

More clothes came off next. Fast, messy, no pretenses. His shirt buttons popped under my fumbling fingers, one scattering across the tile like a tiny gunshot.

He didn't care.

Neither did I.

When he stripped me down to my bra and panties, I felt the tremor in his hands. It undid me more than anything else. Without breaking the kiss, I pushed him backward until the backs of his legs hit the edge of the bed. He sat, legs spread slightly, looking up at me like I was the only thing in the world worth having.

Still holding his gaze, I dropped the condom onto the bedspread beside him.

My fingers went to his belt, working it open slowly. Damian watched every move, breathing harder now, his hands flexing on his thighs like he was seconds from grabbing me.

When I pulled off his designer jeans, he was already hard—hot, thick, straining for me. I picked up the condom, tearing it open carefully between my teeth while his eyes darkened to almost black. Then, without rushing, I rolled it onto him—my hands slow, sure, reverent.

Damian hissed through his teeth, his head falling back for half a second like he couldn't take how good it felt. "Jesus, Jules," he muttered. "You're gonna kill me."

I smiled, wicked and slow. "Better to die happy."

He surged up, kissing me like he agreed—dragging me down onto his lap, skin to skin, mouth to mouth. I gasped into him as his hands gripped my hips, lifting me just enough to guide me over him.

One slow, devastating thrust, and he was inside me.

We both froze, caught in that first unbearable stretch of feeling too much, wanting too badly. Then we moved. Together. My hands braced on his shoulders, his mouth everywhere—my neck, my collarbone, the curve of my breast. Every grind of his hips made me feel more and lose more control.

He lifted me, let me take him deeper, let me find my own rhythm. It wasn't frantic, and it wasn't polished.

It was desperate. Hungry.

I rode him slowly at first, savoring the way his breath hitched every time I shifted my angle, every time I squeezed a little tighter around him.

Then faster—when the need climbed higher than either of us could control. He caught my face in both hands, staring up at me like I was something he wasn't sure he

deserved but couldn't stop worshiping anyway.

When I came, it ripped through me like wildfire—blinding, burning, beautiful. I felt him break right after, hips jerking up into mine, his low, broken groan vibrating against my chest where he buried his face.

We settled with our heads against the pillows, tangled and breathless and still too wound up to let go completely. His arms stayed wrapped around me. I stayed exactly where I was—legs tangled with his, heart hammering against his ribs.

As I lay there, feeling him slowly soften inside me, feeling his fingers stroke lazy, possessive circles over the small of my back, one terrifying, breathtaking thought crystallized in my mind.

This wasn't just about sex anymore. Not even close.

The first thing that struck me was the weight of his arm draped around my waist. Damian lay asleep, his breaths deep and rhythmic, while the morning light streamed through a narrow gap in the blackout curtains, spilling softly across his bare shoulder.

He felt warm and solid, an embodiment of comfort I had been reluctant to acknowledge until now. For a brief moment, I remained still, allowing myself to forget everything else. Just two people sharing one hotel room—no baggage, past, or lies lingering between us.

My phone buzzed faintly on the nightstand. Work emails. A client confirmation. Real life waiting just beyond the soft cocoon of tangled sheets and skin.

I slipped carefully out from under his arm, grabbing the thin hotel robe and wrapping it around myself as I padded across the carpet toward the small sitting area. I wasn't ready to start the day yet. I just needed a moment to collect my random thoughts.

A sleek tablet rested on the coffee table—Damian's, unmistakably. Its screen flickered softly, a constellation of notifications illuminating the dim room. I hadn't intended to glance at it; I swear to God, I didn't. But the allure of its glow beckoned me, a siren call that tugged at my curiosity. The top message caught my eye: a bold subject line flashing from his PR team.

URGENT: Major Donor Withdrawal – Vérité Foundation

My stomach twisted, and I blinked, pretending for half a second that I hadn't seen it. But the email preview scrolled slowly upward on its own.

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"Given recent developments and public concerns regarding Sinclair Holdings subsidiaries, we regretfully must withdraw our planned endowment..."

My throat tightened.

Sinclair Holdings.

The Cut of Her Jib.

The rumors. The bankruptcy. The puzzle pieces slammed into place, one by one. The thing that hit the hardest wasn't the money. It wasn't even the foundation's potential collapse. It was that he hadn't told me. Not when he asked me to come here to help with the exchange. Not when he pulled me into his world. Not when he pulled me into his arms.

Behind me, I heard the sheets rustle as Damian shifted awake. I closed the tablet softly, set it back where I found it, and turned around just as he scrubbed a hand through his hair and blinked up at me, groggy but smiling.

"You're up early," he rasped.

I smiled too. At least, I think I did. The kind of smile that didn't touch my heart.

"Couldn't sleep," I said lightly, cinching the robe tighter at my waist. "We have a long day ahead."

He didn't notice the lie. Or maybe he did, and didn't want to acknowledge it.

Either way, the damage was already done.

I wasn't angry yet. Not fully. However, the foundation of our trust was cracked. No matter how careful he was or how much I still wanted to believe in him, it was only a matter of time before the whole thing caved in.

After checking his emails, Damian yawned and made his way to the shower. As he stepped out of the bathroom, towel slung low around his hips, drying his hair with another. Casual. Relaxed. Like the foundation of his life, and by extension, mine, wasn't crumbling around us.

"Room service?" he asked, voice still scratchy from sleep. "Coffee?"

I pulled the robe tighter around myself, ignoring the way my heart hammered against it. There was no good time for this. No right words. So I went for the truth. "How bad is it really?" I asked softly.

He froze, just for a second. A blink, a hesitation before he glanced toward his tablet. But I caught it. Damian dropped the towel onto the armchair and straightened, masking the shift with a lazy shrug. "Not the end of the world," he said easily. "Minor turbulence. Foundations take hits all the time."

I stared at him and waited. The lie hovered between us like smoke. Finally, he exhaled sharply, pacing a slow line toward the window. "It's The Cut of Her Jib," he said, quieter now. "Thebrand's folding. Investors pulled out, and now the bankruptcy is in motion."

I didn't move.

"And Vérité?" I asked, even though I already knew.

He pivoted, his fingers combing through his wet hair. “It’s bleeding. Some donors are pulling back. They’re concerned about how it looks, especially with Louisa gone. They don’t believe I have the leadership bona fides the foundation needs.” His voice held no trace of anger or surprise—just an underlying weariness.

I stood there, arms wrapped around myself like armor, and asked the only question that mattered. “When were you going to tell me?”

He looked at me then—really looked—and for a second, the mask slipped. “I wasn’t,” he said, rough and raw. “I didn’t want you caught in it. I didn’t want you tainted by association.”

Tainted. The word landed with a thud in my chest. “So you decided for me.”

He flinched—barely, but I saw it. “I thought I was protecting you.”

I nodded slowly, the edges of my vision blurring not from tears, but from the sheer, staggering weight of it. Of everything he hadn’t trusted me to carry.

"You didn’t trust me enough to let me choose you even with your financial difficulties,” I said. Quiet. Final.

Damian’s jaw flexed once—hard. But he didn’t say a word. And that silence? It said everything.

I didn’t wait for him to find the right apology. I didn’t wait for him at all.

I turned away, gathering my clothes from the scattered mess we’d made the night before. Slowly, I pulled my dress pants over my hips and buttoned my blouse with careful, unhurried fingers. My heels slipped on, one after the other, the small clicks against the tiled entryway louder than anything either of us could say. I could feel his

gaze on me the entire time—heavy, desperate, silent.

I didn't look up. Didn't flinch. I didn't let him see how my heart was breaking in real time.

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When I finally straightened, smoothing the strap of my bag over my shoulder, my hands didn't shake as I walked to the door and opened it. The hallway beyond was quiet. Empty. Freezing. Just like the space he'd left between us.

I stepped out without looking back and closed the door with a soft, final click. As I turned to leave, the walls seemed to tighten around me, and I felt it all.

The betrayal.

The heartbreak.

That reckless hope that had led me down this path. For the first time since crossing paths with Damian Sinclair, I didn't question whether he would come after me.

If he had truly wanted me, he would have never let me slip away in the first place.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Damian

The door clicked shut behind her, final and hollow and far too loud in the empty hotel suite.

I stood there for a beat—naked, the cool air brushing over my skin like judgment. The bed behind me was a wreck of tangled sheets, damp with the heat we'd left behind.

I could still smell her—citrus and vanilla, the sharper edge of her perfume, the deeper musk of sex. God, I could still feel her. Everywhere.

I dropped onto the edge of the mattress, elbows braced on my knees, head in my hands. The bed dipped beneath my weight, still warm where she'd been. Still heavy with everything I hadn't been brave enough to say.

The buzz of my phone cracked through the silence. I grabbed it without thinking, needing something—anything—to ground me.

Mateo: Hey D. Hope you're good. Any chance you could help with book fees? Just short this term. No rush. Thanks, man.

I stared at the message longer than necessary, the ordinary loyalty of it cracking something raw inside me.

The science was there—undeniable, written in the angles of his jaw, the sharpness of his mind, the odd little quirks we shared without ever trying. I was the man whose DNA he carried in every cell of his body.

I thumbed a reply:

Damian: Of course. Let me know what you need.

I sat there for a long moment, letting the lie of omission settle over me like a second skin. Familiar. Heavy.

I couldn't stop thinking about the question Juliette had asked somewhere over the Atlantic: Would you ever consider it?

Could I willingly give someone the same thing I'd once signed away without

thought?

Hell... I already had.

But Mateo hadn't arrived with expectations. He'd come into the world through science, not sentiment—no face attached to the facts. No father waiting on the other side of the glass to hold him.

Yet, somewhere along the line, I got pulled in anyway.

The idea of doing it again—intentionally—scared the hell out of me in a way nothing else ever had.

It wasn't about DNA. It was about what came after. The knowing. The permanence. The irreversible truth that somewhere out there, a part of me would exist, with or without me.

I leaned back on the mattress, letting its weight sink into my chest. Letting the memory of Juliette's hands, her breath, the way her body curled into mine, press into me like a bruise that hadn't even started to fade.

What would it even look like?

Not the neat, calculated life my father had expected. Not the cold detachment of money over meaning. He hadn't raised a son. He'd funded one.

As for me? I was dangerously close to repeating the same damn story—too cowardly to break the pattern before it wrote itself into the next generation.

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The phone buzzed again.

Juliette: Boarding my flight. Safe travels.

Short. Polite. Not a single trace of the woman who had shattered in my arms just hours ago. I closed my eyes against the burn in my throat—the one scraped raw by all the things I hadn't said.

I typed back:

Damian: You too. Talk soon.

I knew the second I hit send that it was a lie. She wasn't coming back. Not unless I became a man worth coming back to.

But right now?

All I was left with was the empty bed, the hollow scent of her skin on mine, and a future slipping through my fingers faster than I could hold on.

By the time I pulled on my clothes and shoved the last of my things into my carry-on, the suite smelled like nothing. The windows were cracked to let in the crisp Baden-Baden air. The room was already erasing us.

I checked the time. Juliette's flight would be in the air by now. Gone—before I could fix any of it.

I didn't bother ordering breakfast. Didn't bother checking out at the desk. Just left my key card in the room and took the elevator down in silence. The car waiting for me was the same one that had picked us up yesterday—polished black, unassuming. The driver greeted me with a quiet nod, loading my bag into the back without a word.

The drive to the private terminal was short. Too short. The kind of quiet that leaves too much space for the wrong thoughts. The jet was fueled and ready. A fresh-faced flight attendant in a crisp navy uniform met me at the stairs with a polite smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Sinclair. Welcome back. Will Ms. Vanderburg be joining us this morning?” Her words sliced harder than they should have.

I shook my head once, keeping my voice even. “No. She made other arrangements.”

The flight attendant hesitated—just a second too long. Then she smiled, a little softer, a little more deliberate. “Well. If you need anything during the flight... anything at all... please let me know.”

I gave her the barest nod and climbed the stairs without another word. I wasn't in the mood for easy smiles or another notch in my mile-high club belt.

Inside, the jet was just like before, immaculate—polished floors, leather seats, the faint scent of espresso from the galley. Everything was exactly how it should be, except everything was wrong.

I dropped into a seat by the window, buckled in, and let my head fall back against the rest as the engines roared to life. The ground slid away beneath us. Germany disappeared behind a shroud of low clouds and regrets I hadn't packed neatly enough to leave behind.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, my phone buzzed again.

Morris Wextner: A board meeting is scheduled for Wednesday at 9 a.m. Valencia requested your attendance. Come prepared to answer questions about your leadership viability at Vérité.

I stared at the message until the words blurred. Not about the money. Not about the bankruptcy. It was about whether I was still the man who could be trusted to lead the foundation I'd poured everything into—or if I was just another rich failure who couldn't tell the difference between legacy and vanity until it was too late.

Vérité had never been about profit. It had been about meaning. Legacy. Proof that not everything I touched turned transactional. Now, even that was slipping away.

I typed out my reply:

Damian: Understood. See you Wednesday.

I closed my eyes and tossed my phone into the seat beside me, where Juliette should have been. The seat already felt too empty, cold, and wrong without her.

For a moment, I just sat there, staring at the blank leather, letting the plane's low vibrations hum under my skin. And like a knife slipping between ribs, another memory hit. The way she had laughed low against my chest the night before, her fingertip sketching idle shapes over my heart as if she could map a future there if she just traced it carefully enough.

The way I had almost—almost—told her not to go. Not to give up on us yet. But I hadn't. Because cowards didn't deserve futures like that, and that's exactly what I was—then, and now.

The jet engines roared louder as we ascended, the clouds tearing apart like paper under the plane's nose. Baden-Baden fell away. The Atlantic stretched out. Miami's

heat waited on the other side, heavy, familiar, and suddenly unwelcome.

The doors swung open to thick, humid air when we finally touched down. The light slashed across the tarmac in hard, bright angles. Yet I barely noticed it. The first thing I saw—clear as a goddamn billboard—was the private lot by the terminal.

Empty.

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The parking spot where Juliette's car had been yesterday? Vacant now. Gone. No note. No second chance.

Funny. I'd survived hostile takeovers. Messy lawsuits. Bitter boardroom betrayals. But one woman, in one black dress, with one too-knowing smile, had undone me without even trying, and this time... there was no strategy. No PR spin. No undo button.

Only the wreckage I'd made—and the woman who had finally, finally, stopped giving me the chance to fix it.

Now, I wasn't sure if I'd just lost her trust or lost her for good.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Juliette

As I signed the last dotted line, the pen felt heavier than it should have.

The leasing agent—an overly cheerful man with loafers too shiny to trust—beamed at me as he slid the paperwork into a sleek leather folder. “Congratulations, Ms. Vanderburg,” he said, pushing the keys across the narrow desk. “You officially have a storefront now for Reliable Art Services.”

I mustered a smile, the polite kind you give when you're supposed to feel victorious, but all you feel is hollow. “Thanks,” I said, my voice breezy enough to mask the slow, careful panic uncurling in my chest.

The truth was, I'd thought about backing out. I had even rehearsed what I'd say to him, something light and regretful. I'd planned to blame it on a delayed loan, on needing to rework the numbers, on anything but the real reason: that I was tangled up in something with Damian Sinclair, and for a minute there, I thought perhaps plans would change.

But they hadn't. At least, not the way I hoped.

And if I'd learned anything lately, it was that waiting on someone else to decide your future was a dangerous kind of limbo. So I'd signed. And now the keys were warm in my palm.

He gave a few more instructions about parking passes and mail delivery that I barely heard before finally standing to shake my hand. The door swung closed behind him with a cheerful chime. The office—myoffice—fell into a deep, expectant silence.

I stood in the middle of the empty room, the echoes of his departure still fading. The space was beautiful, objectively speaking. High ceilings. Crisp white walls begging for art. Warm oak floors that glowed under the afternoon light spilling through the tall windows.

It should have felt like a beginning. Instead, it felt suspiciously like building a fortress. I wasn't just building a business. I was building walls.

I turned the key in the lock, hearing the soft metallic click, and leaned back against the door, letting my head fall back with a soft thud. One shaky breath. Then another.

I wasn't going to fall apart.

Not now.

Not over this.

This was the career I wanted, wasn't it? Independence. Purpose. A way to shape something of my own without waiting for someone else to offer it—or ruin it.

My phone buzzed against my hip.

Gabrielle: Furniture shopping? You're not doing this alone. I'm on my way. Anthony's on Julian duty. Save me a parking spot.

A surprised laugh slipped out of me before I could stop it. God, I loved her. Even when she didn't know how much I needed saving, she showed up anyway.

I glanced out the tall front window. The street beyond was bustling with late afternoon Miami traffic, flashes of green palms and pastel shops blurring into the sun-soaked backdrop of Coconut Grove. Out there, the world kept spinning. Inside here, my new life was quietly waiting for me to be brave enough to claim it.

I texted back quickly:

Juliette: Hurry. I'm about to buy a neon pink velvet couch out of pure panic.

Her reply came a second later:

Gabrielle: Wouldn't even stop you. It would match your chaos aesthetic perfectly.

I smiled as I slipped my phone back into my bag. Maybe the timing wasn't perfect. Maybe my heart was still a mess. Maybe Damian Sinclair was still tangled somewhere in the threads of my future I hadn't figured out how to cut.

But for today—for this small, flickering moment, I could believe that starting over

didn't have to mean starting alone.

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I pushed off the door, squared my shoulders, and waited for my sister. The hardest parts were still ahead, but so were the best ones.

The upscale furniture emporium smelled like sandalwood candles and optimism. Gabrielle and I wandered through rows of glossy desks and cushioned armchairs, arguing about practicality versus style in low, half-laughing voices. She kept steering me toward heavy, serious pieces—the kind of furniture that screamed I have an assistant who screens my calls.

I, naturally, kept drifting toward things that didn't match at all: velvet chairs, a gold-trimmed glass desk, a ridiculous art deco lamp shaped like a flamingo.

“You’re going to blind your clients with that thing,” Gabrielle muttered as I admired the flamingo lamp.

“They’ll be so dazzled by my taste, they won’t even care about their appraisal fees,” I quipped, twirling the lamp’s shade like a prize wheel.

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the flicker of real affection behind them. It felt good. Normal. Like the world hadn’t tilted sideways somewhere between Baden-Baden and Miami.

We paused in front of a sleek walnut desk with clean lines, just enough presence without being intimidating. I ran my fingers along the edge, feeling the weight of the decision settle in my chest.

Gabrielle leaned a hip against the nearest chair, arms crossed loosely.

“So...” she said, voice casual but a little too light. “Are we going to talk about it?”

I didn’t pretend not to know what she meant. Instead, I sighed and let my forehead fall briefly onto the cool surface of the desk. “You mean the part where I basically asked Damian to help me start a family and he treated it like I’d offered him a timeshare in hell?”

Gabrielle snorted softly. “Maybe not in those exact words.”

I straightened, brushing imaginary dust from my blouse. “It’s not just that,” I muttered. “It’s everything. He couldn’t even admit it when I practically handed him the chance to be honest.”

“About being a sperm donor?” she asked gently.

I nodded, throat tightening.

“I get it,” Gabrielle said after a beat. “You wanted him to meet you halfway. To trust you enough to tell you the truth.”

I picked at a loose thread on my cuff. “He wouldn’t even consider it. Helping me. No strings attached.”

Gabrielle’s gaze softened in that twin-sister way that always made me feel simultaneously understood and called out.

“Maybe it’s not that simple, Jules,” she said, her voice softer now. “Friends-with-benefits sounds easy until real life shows up. One side always outweighs the other—either the friendship or the fun. And once you add a kid into the mix... It’s not just complicated. It’s chaos. For everyone.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but closed it just as fast. Because she was right, a child would change everything. Those lines blurred even if things started with good intentions and clear boundaries. Kids asked questions. Kids deserved answers.

“You’re asking for permanent ties,” Gabrielle added quietly. “Even if you don’t call it that.”

The lump in my throat grew heavier. Gabrielle nudged me gently with her shoulder. “And besides... maybe you’re wrong about him. Maybe it’s not even him in the donor catalogue.”

I tried to laugh, but it came out brittle. Gabrielle didn’t push. She just smiled and picked up a swatch book, flipping it open.

“Come on,” she said, tossing it at me. “Pick a chair before you drive me crazy. Something that says serious art professional, not reformed flamingo enthusiast.”

I caught the swatch book against my chest and smiled—this time for real.

Maybe life didn’t come in perfect packages. Maybe family didn’t either. But sisters? Sisters stayed. And right now, that was enough.

We left the furniture store lighter in the wallet and heavier in the arms—two rolling carts stacked with catalogs, sample books, and a pair of ridiculous coffee mugs Gabrielle insisted we needed for the office. One said ‘CEO’ and one said ‘Caffeinated and Dangerous.’ My sister thought I needed both, and I didn’t argue.

After we loaded everything into Gabrielle’s SUV, we stopped at a little Cuban café tucked into the edge of Coconut Grove. The place smelled like burnt sugar and cinnamon and had mismatched chairs that scraped too loudly against the tile. It wasn’t fancy. It was perfect.

I wrapped my hands around the warm ceramic of my cappuccino, the heat grounding me as the fatigue finally started to creep in—the slow crash after weeks of pushing forward, pushing past.

Across the table, Gabrielle studied me over the rim of her cold brew, swirling her spoon through the melting ice like she was trying to stir up a distraction.

“There’s more,” I said, licking the foam off my upper lip. “You know what really pissed me off?” I leaned in slightly. “I’d heard whispers about Damian’s financial mess, but he tried to hide the truth from me.” I took another sip. “Vérité is bleeding donors, and he didn’t even give me a chance to stand by him.”

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Gabrielle set her spoon down and met my eyes. “You know today’s his board meeting, right?”

I blinked. “What?”

She shrugged, too casual to be casual. “Anthony told me. Damian’s got a full board review at Vérité this afternoon. Valencia called it. Pretty formal. Pretty serious.”

I stared at her, my stomach tilting sideways. “And you’re telling me now?”

“I didn’t want to dump it on you while you were signing leases and arguing over chair fabrics,” she said, nudging her coffee aside. “But yeah. It’s today. By tonight, he could be out. Everything he built could be gone.”

The words hit harder than they should have. Harder than I wanted them to. I looked down at the foam art in my cup, tracing the edges of the clumsy heart someone had swirled into the top. “He didn’t say anything.”

“Of course he didn’t,” Gabrielle said gently. “Because Damian Sinclair would rather walk through fire than ask someone to hold his hand.”

I huffed a breath that was half a laugh, half a cracked rib. “That sounds about right.”

She leaned in, elbows on the table. “You don’t have to fix it for him, Jules. You don’t have to fix him. But...” She hesitated, searching my face. “You always said you wanted something real. Not curated. Not premeditated. Real connection. And sometimes, that starts by showing up. Especially when it’s the hardest thing to do.”

The words sat heavy between us, heavier than the lease I'd just signed or the office I'd just filled. Just show up not as a lover. Not as a liability. Not even as the woman he might've broken.

Just... a friend.

I stared out the window at the street, the late afternoon sun throwing long shadows over the sidewalk, and wondered when exactly the ground under my feet had started to shift without warning me first.

Gabrielle didn't push. She just sipped her coffee, waiting. Maybe she already knew. Maybe deep down, I did too.

I wrapped my hands tighter around the cup, feeling the warmth seep into my fingers even as the doubt stayed cold inside me. Gabrielle was right. Connections didn't come with guarantees. They came with risk. Like showing up, even when you didn't know if the door would swing open—or slam in your face.

I set the cup down carefully, the slight clink loud in the quiet space between us. "I'm not promising anything," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "I'm just... not ready to disappear."

Gabrielle smiled—small, proud. "Good."

She didn't say anything else. She didn't need to.

As we gathered our things and headed back into Miami's late afternoon sun, one thought kept pressing against my ribs, stubborn and impossible to ignore. Maybe love didn't start with fireworks. Maybe it started by walking back into the fire... and choosing to stay.

We parted ways outside the coffee shop—Gabrielle waving as she headed toward her car. I stood there for a moment, keys in hand, the sound of the city rising around me.

I could go home. Lose myself in client calls and color swatches and new beginnings, and pretend tonight didn't matter.

Or... I could drive toward the one place where it did.

I slid into the driver's seat, the engine springing to life beneath me, without thinking too hard about it.

I pointed my car toward Vérité.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Damian

The polished glass doors of the Vérité Foundation boardroom reflected my face as I reached for the handle—a face that looked a hell of a lot calmer than I felt.

Inside, the tension was thick enough to bottle and sell. Judge Valencia sat at the head of the table, flanked by Anthony on one side and a semicircle of donors and trustees on the other. The usual coffee carafes and silver water pitchers gleamed on the sideboard, untouched.

“Damian,” Valencia said smoothly, gesturing to the seat at the far end. “Glad you could join us.”

As if I had a choice.

I slid into the chair, back straight, hands folded on the table, and met their gazes one-

by-one. The small talk was over before it began.

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Anthony cleared his throat. “You’re aware of the headlines?”

“The Cut of Her Jibbankruptcy?” I said dryly. “Hard to miss.”

A flicker of irritation crossed Valencia’s face. “Not just that. We’ve had calls. Louisa’s sudden departure has spooked donors. Without a replacement in place, the gala’s attendance is down by nearly twenty percent—and that was just this morning.”

I inhaled slowly. “I’m working on the Louisa situation.”

“Are you?” One of the older trustees leaned forward, fingers steepled. “Because from where we’re sitting, Damian, it looks like you’ve got one hand on a sinking ship and the other tangled in your personal life.”

Anthony shot the man a quick warning glance, but Valencia waved it off.

“Let’s speak plainly,” Valencia said, folding his hands on the polished table. “Your real estate portfolio is impressive, Damian. California, Miami, Europe. But inherited wealth isn’t the same as earned trust. You know that.”

The room went still. Not a cough. Not a shuffle of paper.

I forced a measured smile. “I’ve been a patron of the arts since long before Vérité came calling. I’ve funded exhibitions, supported young artists, and chaired restitution committees. My personal commitment to this foundation hasn’t wavered.”

The judge lifted an eyebrow. “But the public’s perception of you has.”

A beat of silence. The old-school boardroom kind—the one designed to sweat you out.

Valencia leaned back slightly. “We’re suggesting something simple. A gesture. Sell one of your Miami condo properties. Cover The Cut of Her Jib debt yourself. Show donors that you’ve reinvested—not just in returning stolen art, but in the survival of this institution.”

Anthony’s eyes flicked to mine — sympathetic but cautious. This wasn’t his fight to win for me.

I exhaled slowly, fingertips tapping once against the table. “I’ve spent months building this foundation’s reputation. I won’t deny the optics are bad right now. But I’m not walking away because we hit rough water. I’ll take care of the debt. I’ll secure the lineup for the Vérité Annual Gala. And I’ll have a candidate shortlist for Louisa’s replacement before the board reconvenes.”

The room stirred — a soft rustle of approval, doubt, or both.

“And if you don’t?” Valencia asked quietly.

I looked him dead in the eye. “Then I’ll step down.”

It hung there, sharp as a blade.

Judge Valencia’s expression softened—just a fraction. “You have until the gala.”

Anthony gave a small nod. “We all want to see you succeed, Damian.”

The meeting adjourned with a scrape of chairs and the low murmur of parting words. Papers shuffled, tablets closed, polite smiles deployed as the board members filed out

one-by-one.

I stayed seated.

For a long moment, I watched the streetlights flicker to life outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, their glow catching on the polished floors as headlights traced soft ribbons of light across the glass. The weight of it all—the money, the expectations, the brittle edge of trust—settled across my shoulders like a coat I'd been wearing too long to notice.

The office was quiet once they were gone. I sank into the leather chair behind my desk, the cushions sighing under my weight as I yanked loose the knot of my tie and let it hang limp around my collar. The Miami skyline glimmered beyond the window—streetlights, car beams, the distant neon haze buzzing to life as the city shifted into night.

For a while, I just sat there. Breathing.

The boardroom echoes still rang in my head—Valencia's sharp-edged words, Anthony's measured disappointment, the donors' carefully veiled doubts. It all blurred together into one heavy refrain: Are you the man for this, Damian?

My gaze drifted over the rows of buildings, the crowded avenues, the faint shimmer of the bay beyond.

I wondered—not for the first time—if all I'd done was polish the edges of my father's empire. If anything I'd touched was truly mine. Real estate portfolios, corporations, and development deals. Legacy wrapped in a suit.

And love?

That was the part I couldn't seem to hold on to.

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I pulled my phone from my pocket, thumb hovering over Juliette's name. For a second—just one stupid, hungry second—I almost typed I miss you. Almost.

Instead, I locked the screen and set the phone facedown on the desk.

Mateo's text flashed through my mind—his easy ask, his quiet trust.

A faint sound stirred at the edge of the silence—soft footsteps, the whisper of a door easing open.

I turned, heart thudding once in a way I didn't expect.

Juliette stood in the doorway, the dim light catching the curve of her smile. Her arms were casually wrapped around her purse.

"I hoped you might still be here," she said quietly.

The weight slipped from my shoulders for a heartbeat, and neither of us moved.

Juliette stood just inside the doorway, the glow from the hallway casting a soft outline around her. She wore dark jeans and a simple blouse, her hair loose around her shoulders, like she hadn't planned to be here, like she'd almost talked herself out of it—and then came anyway.

I let out a slow breath and pushed back from the desk, running a hand through my hair. "You're a surprise," I said.

Her mouth curved in the faintest smile. “That makes two of us.”

I gestured to the chair across from me, but she shook her head and stepped closer instead, arms still loosely folded. She glanced around the office—the sleek furniture, the framed Kandinsky poster on the wall, the crystal decanter on the side table like some relic from a more polished version of myself.

“I came to grab a few things I left before I moved them to the new office,” she said, voice light, easy. “But... I figured I’d check on you first.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, watching her. “Checking on me?” I echoed, half a smile tugging at my mouth. “That’s dangerously close to caring, Vanderburg.”

Her laugh was soft but real. “Don’t get used to it.”

The air stretched between us, delicate and charged. I scrubbed a hand over my face, exhaling hard. “Board meeting ended a little while ago. It was... about as fun as you’d expect.”

Her brow creased slightly, the teasing edge slipping from her expression. “Rough?”

“Of course, they saw the news about the bankruptcy of The Cut of Her Jib. Now that we are bleeding donors, they are looking for answers... They want results,” I admitted, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. “They want stability, fresh blood, a new face to reassure the donors. And they want it all by our annual gala.”

Juliette lowered herself onto the arm of the chair across from me, one foot braced lightly on the floor. “Sounds like you’re carrying the world, Damian.”

I let out a short, humorless laugh. “Sometimes it feels like it’s carrying me.”

We sat like that for a few quiet seconds, the tension softening just enough for me to breathe without feeling like my chest might crack.

“Look,” she said gently, “I don’t know if this is the best timing, or even if it’s my place, but...” She hesitated, biting her lip briefly, then met my gaze. “Do you want to grab a drink? Just a bar down the street. No business talk. No headlines. Just... people.”

My throat tightened, something sharp and hopeful cutting through the exhaustion.

For a beat, I almost did—almost gave in to the instinct to retreat, save face, and keep pretending I didn’t want more. That old, familiar armor had kept me upright through boardrooms and breakups, through headlines and losses. It was easier, safer, to stay behind it. To let her walk out of this office like she had walked out of that hotel suite, leaving me with nothing but the echo of what we could’ve been.

But the thing was, I did want more.

More than the casual texts and late-night calls. More than the passion we fell into when neither of us wanted to think too hard. More than the version of me that only showed up when it was convenient.

I wanted her laughter across the table, her voice cutting through the quiet when the nights got too heavy. I wanted the person who called me on my bullshit, who saw through the polished image and didn’t flinch.

So, yeah—I wanted more.

And for the first time in longer than I cared to admit, I was done pretending I didn’t.

I let out a slow breath, feeling the weight of the boardroom, the legacy, the endless

expectations slide off my shoulders, just a little.

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“I could use a drink,” I murmured.

Juliette’s smile softened, a little warmer this time, as if she could hear everything I hadn’t managed to say.

“There’s a place around the corner,” she offered, stepping in just far enough to bridge the space between us. “Good wine. Terrible music. Low expectations.”

A dry laugh worked its way up my throat—unexpected, unpolished, and somehow more honest than anything I’d said in days.

“Sounds perfect,” I said.

For the first time all week, the tight band across my chest loosened. Just a little. Just enough.

I reached for my jacket, glancing at her as she leaned casually against the doorframe.

“Juliette,” I said quietly, and when she looked up, it hit me harder than I expected. “Thanks... for showing up.”

She shrugged, the corner of her mouth tipping up. “Not sure if I’m doing it for you... or for me.”

“Or for both of us,” I muttered. And just like that, the night felt less heavy. The future... maybe not easier, but not quite so impossible.

We left the office together, side by side—not as business associates, not as lovers, but as something in between.

“I’ll meet you there, Jules.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Juliette

The bar was tucked into the corner of the Ocean Breeze Hotel, all low lighting and deep velvet booths, the kind of place where voices softened, and time stretched. I spotted him before he saw me—Damian, sitting at the far end, one elbow draped over the back of the booth, a glass of red wine in hand, his jacket carelessly tossed beside him. His shirt was open at the collar, his tie gone, his hair a little mussed from the day. He looked... tired. And beautiful. And like the man I had been trying and failing to forget.

When his gaze lifted and found mine, something in his face changed. Not the public mask he wore at galas and boardrooms. Not the polished charm I’d seen him use a hundred times before. Something real.

He stood as I approached—old-fashioned, unnecessary, but it made something warm flicker low in my chest.

“I missed you, Jules,” he said quietly as he reached out to caress my cheek. “I’m sorry about the way things turned out in Germany.”

In the past, I would have laughed it off, tossed him some light comment, and kept it breezy and safe. But instead, I just stood there, feeling my heart tip forward in my chest.

“I missed you, too,” I admitted, the words tasting strange and sweet on my tongue.

We settled into the booth, the candles on the table flickering between us. The first sips of wine loosened my shoulders, the softness in Damian’s voice unspooled some knot I hadn’t even known I’d been carrying. We talked about everything and nothing. The new office. The weather. A ridiculous art world scandal had popped up in the news that morning.

But beneath it all, the current pulled at us—the one we kept trying to ignore but never could.

When the second glass arrived, Damian leaned back, eyes half-lidded, thumb brushing the rim of his glass. “You ever think,” he murmured, “we were just pretending to keep it casual?”

My laugh was soft. “If we were, we were terrible at it.”

He smiled—faint, almost private—and for a moment, the whole world narrowed to the space between us.

That was when I felt it—the weight of my own armor. The independence I wore like a shield. The need to stand on my own, do it all myself, prove I didn’t need anyone. I saw it in Gabrielle’s eyes earlier, the way she watched me fuss over every detail of the new office, the way she gently offered help, and I gently brushed her off.

The truth hit me with the kind of quiet clarity that only comes with candlelight and confession:

Perhaps my fierce independence wasn’t just a strength. Perhaps it was a cage.

The secret that kept me from emotionally growing.

I excused myself, murmuring something about the restroom. I needed a breath, a moment to gather my thoughts.

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Inside, I stood at the sink, hands braced on the marble, staring at a version of myself I wasn't sure I fully recognized. My lipstick was smudged—eyes too bright. A woman on the edge of something she wasn't sure she was brave enough to name.

I smoothed my hair and took a steadying breath. And quietly, just for me, I whispered, “I can't stay away from him.”

It wasn't a confession to the mirror. It was the truth to myself, and if I was going to figure out how to make this last—whatever this was—I had to be willing to put down the armor.

I straightened, pressed my palms against the cool marble, and gave the woman in the mirror the smallest, bravest smile I could manage. Then I turned, ready to go back to the table.

Ready to go back to Damian.

By the time I slid back into the booth, Damian was idly tracing a fingertip around the rim of his wineglass, gaze distant, jaw tight. Whatever relaxed warmth we'd carved out over the past hour had slipped, leaving behind the man I recognized all too well—the one carrying a weight on his shoulders and pretending it didn't hurt.

“Hey,” I said softly, nudging his knee under the table. “Where'd you go just now?”

He blinked, then offered a half-smile. “Just thinking.”

“Dangerous pastime,” I teased gently.

He huffed a quiet laugh. “The board meeting today... It was rougher than I let on.”

I leaned in, elbows on the table. “Tell me.”

For a moment, he hesitated—then something in his posture softened. He tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling like the words were tucked somewhere up there. “They think I’m coasting on inheritance. Riding on my father’s name, my family’s money. They’re... not wrong.” His jaw clenched. “They want proof I’m invested. That I’m not just some billionaire with a nice portfolio.”

I watched him carefully, my heart tugging. “And are you?”

His gaze dropped to mine, raw and exposed. “I want to be more.”

It was such a quiet admission, so unlike the suave, deflecting man I usually sat across from, that it punched the air right out of my chest.

“Then let me help,” I murmured before I could overthink it.

His brow furrowed. “Help how?”

I took a slow breath, the idea forming even as I spoke. “What if Reliable Art Services partnered with Vérité? I mean, think about it—I can help appraise, advise, maybe even handle legacy pieces or estates. You can connect my clients with placement options or high-profile buyers. And if donors know I’m volunteering with the foundation and not on the payroll... it’s good for both of us.”

For the first time all night, something sparked in his eyes—not just interest, but something hungry, almost boyish. “Juliette, that’s... brilliant.”

I felt myself flush, warmth blooming low in my belly. “You think?”

“I know.” His laugh was soft, almost disbelieving. “You know, when I was a kid... my father thought the best way to show love was to ship me off to boarding school. And my mother—” he hesitated, just briefly, “she left while we were living in Paris. I guess I’ve been carrying around this idea that you can’t really count on anyone. But here you are.” He shook his head, a little dazed. “Showing up.”

I squeezed his hand, feeling something crack open between us. “Maybe we can both rewrite a few stories.”

Damian was already reaching for his phone, thumb flicking over the screen. “I have an idea—let’s call Gabrielle and loop Anthony in. I want to hear what they think about this.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed Gabrielle. She picked up on the second ring, laughter in her tone, with Anthony’s voice in the background, cheering loudly at whatever game he was watching.

“Hey,” I said, smiling at the sound of home. “Can I put you on speaker?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

Damian leaned in, voice low and eager. “Anthony, it’s Damian. Juliette has this idea—partnering Reliable with Vérité. Appraisals, donor relations, estate consulting... It’s a natural fit. What do you think?”

There was a beat of silence, then Anthony’s voice, bright and sure. “That’s exactly the kind of innovation the board’s been craving. And frankly, Damian, it’s the first time in weeks you’ve sounded excited about something. Do it.”

Gabrielle chimed in, teasing, “Told you she was the sharp one.”

Damian laughed—a real, chest-deep laugh that lit his face from the inside out. When he ended the call, he reached across the table, catching my hand.

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“You just saved my ass,” he murmured, thumb brushing the back of my knuckles. “You do know that, right?”

I swallowed around the knot rising in my throat. “I’m not trying to save you, Damian. I’m trying to stand next to you.”

For a second, neither of us moved. Just the soft clink of glasses, the low sound of music, the quiet admission of two people finally—maybe—stopping the pretense.

In his eyes, I saw it: the same thing I was finally ready to admit.

We were never just friends with benefits. We were never casual. We were always inevitably something more.

“Dance with me,” he murmured, voice rough at the edges, yet carrying a softness that tugged at something deep within me. God, I should have hesitated. Should have held back just a little. But the truth was, when Damian touched me, hesitation melted like sugar on my tongue.

I let him pull me up. His arms slid around me like they had so many times before, one at the small of my back, the other curling around my waist, fingertips pressing just enough to remind me he was there. Like I could forget. The world outside ceased to exist as we became our own universe, swaying gently to the rhythm that seemed to pulse in time with our heartbeats. “You know... I can actually picture this working.”

I smiled, chest warming. “It’s crazy, isn’t it? Reliable Art Services and Vérité Foundation, two completely different worlds—but the more we talked tonight, the

more I could see it. We could help families who don't know what to do with inherited art, connect them to the right buyers, bring those donors into the foundation's circle?—"

"—and finally have an in-house expert who knows what the hell they're doing when an appraisal crisis lands on my desk," Damian finished, a grin tugging at his mouth. His eyes softened when they met mine. "It's been a long time since I was this excited about something that wasn't... restoration work."

I rested my head lightly against his shoulder. "Feels good, doesn't it? To build instead of just patch holes."

His hands flexed on my waist, pulling me a little closer. "Feels a lot like you."

The music faded, leaving a hush between us that felt heavier than the quiet ambience of the bar around us. We lingered there, fingers lightly intertwined on the table, eyes tracing each other's faces as if neither of us was ready to let the night go.

"Do you mind driving me home? I can get my car later," I murmured, brushing my thumb across the back of his hand.

Damian gave a small nod, his mouth curving just slightly. "Sure thing."

The drive was quiet, but it wasn't empty. Our hands brushed on the console now and then, and every stoplight seemed to stretch just a little longer, filling the car with a soft, charged stillness. Halfway there, his voice broke the quiet.

"Have you made that doctor's appointment yet?" he asked carefully, eyes flicking to mine before returning to the road.

I looked out the window, the city lights blurring past in smudged streaks of gold and

red. “No, but I don’t want to discuss my health issues tonight.”

He didn’t push. He just exhaled softly, his fingers flexing briefly on the steering wheel, a silent patience that tightened my throat.

I stayed quiet, but inside, the words churned. I wasn’t ready. Not tonight. Not with the ache between us still so fresh and raw. The truth was, I hadn’t decided what I wanted to do next—hadn’t decided if I was strong enough to chase the dream of becoming a mother alone, or brave enough to ask him again. It was an open wound between us, and if I touched it now, I wasn’t sure if I’d bleed or break.

When we pulled up outside the guest house, I hesitated with my hand on the door handle. The landscape lights were on, casting a magical glow across the drive. My chest tightened—not with nerves, but with something closer to longing, a quiet ache that had been building all night, threaded through every glance, every brush of his fingers, every word left unsaid.

“Stay,” I said, softly but certain.

Damian’s head turned; his profile caught in the dim light. His eyes softened, but there was a flicker of hesitation there, the kind born from months of blurred lines. For a heartbeat, he just looked at me, something flickering across his face that I couldn’t quite name—but felt anyway.

Then, without a word, he turned off the engine and stepped out, circling the car as I opened the door. His arm slid easily around my waist, and I leaned into him as we walked up the path. The night air was cool against my cheeks, his body warm and solid beside me.

Inside, the door clicked shut with a quiet finality, the hush of the house wrapping around us. We stood there for a moment, just breathing, his arm still looped around

my shoulders, my hand resting lightly at his waist.

No rush. No heat of the moment. Just the soft thrum of something we'd both been circling around for too long.

And as we stood there, the simplest truth settled in my chest with a quiet kind of clarity.

I didn't want to be anywhere else.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Damian

When I slipped in, the offices at Vérité were quiet, the kind of stillness that only existed in the early morning before the calls started, before the donors circled, before the weight of my life settled across my shoulders like a custom-cut noose.

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I set my coffee on the long conference table, tapping through the RSVP list on my tablet. Every empty line next to a name felt like a slap: donors hesitating, sponsors wavering, and the gala—mygala—just weeks away.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and leaned back in the chair, letting my gaze drift across the familiar art lining the walls. Somewhere between bankruptcy papers and board ultimatums, I'd stopped seeing the beauty here. All I saw now was risk.

The door opened with awhish.

Juliette swept in like a breeze off the coast—hair pinned up, sleek black slacks, a pale blue blouse that did nothing to hide the sharp mind and sharper tongue underneath. She dropped aleather-bound notebook on the table with a soft thud, grinning as she pulled out her tablet.

“Well, aren’t you a vision of doom this morning, Sinclair?”

I huffed out a laugh despite myself. “You’re in rare form this morning, Vanderburg.”

She shrugged out of her jacket, sliding into the seat beside me, close enough that I caught a faint trace of her perfume—citrus and something warmer, something that still clung to my skin if I let myself remember. “I’m ready to deal with a crisis,” she teased. “And lucky you—you’re a walking, talking one.”

I watched her tap her stylus against the screen, eyes darting between numbers and notes. For someone who wasn’t on the payroll, Juliette worked like the damn CEO.

“Here’s the pitch,” she said briskly. “You need auction items with emotional punch. Experiences, not just art. Private tours, artist dinners, VIP gallery events—things they can’t just buy off a wall. And last but not least, your PR guy needs to leak that you have a professional art appraiser volunteering on weekends.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What, no weekend in the Bahamas with me thrown in?”

Her lips curved, dry and amused. “Please. You’d bankrupt the foundation just covering the bar tab.”

I snorted, shaking my head as I leaned back. God, she was good. Not just at the logistics—the art, the donors, the money—but at this. At reminding me that the walls weren’t closing in, that the fight was still worth it.

For a second, I just watched her. The way her brow furrowed when she concentrated, the flash of satisfaction when she solved a problem no one else in the room even saw. I hadn’t wanted anyone near this mess. But somehow, she made herself essential without asking permission.

Yeah, maybe that terrified me.

“Hey,” she said, glancing up. “You spacing out on me?”

I cleared my throat, smirking. “Just marveling at how bossy you are before ten A.M.”

“Get used to it, Sinclair.” She winked; eyes bright. “You brought me into this circus, remember?”

I leaned forward, elbows on the table, watching her tap through her notes. For the first time in weeks, I felt something like hope stir in my chest—light, fragile, but there.

Suddenly, the door swung open with the casual confidence of someone who didn't need to knock.

Anthony strolled in first, crisp gray jacket over dark jeans, his expression half amusement, half assessment. Right behind him came Gabrielle, arms full of takeaway coffee and pastries, her hair pulled into a glossy knot, gold hoops catching the morning light.

"Well," Anthony drawled, "looks like the grown-ups are already saving the foundation."

Juliette didn't even look up. "Don't interrupt, you two, I'm busy fixing Sinclair's mess."

Anthony chuckled, dropping into a chair and crossing one ankle over his knee. Gabrielle handed me a coffee—extra shot, just how I liked it—before sliding into the seat next to her sister.

"I needed this," I murmured, raising the cup in a lazy salute. "Smart play, Gabrielle."

She grinned. "You're welcome. Enjoy."

Anthony leaned forward, clasping his hands. "So. How's the damage report?"

I took a breath, pulled out my phone, and swiped to the real estate listing I'd been sitting on for three days. "I've put one of my Malibu condos on the market," I said, flipping the phone around for him to see. "That should cover The Cut of Her Jib debt. At least, it'll keep the creditors at bay until after the gala."

Anthony's brow lifted, just a flicker, but his eyes softened. "That's a hell of a move, Damian."

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged, trying to make it look easier than it was. “Turns out inherited wealth only gets you so far. You have to bleed a little, too.”

Juliette’s gaze flicked to mine, a quiet determination there—not smug, not cocky, but something deeper. Pride mixed with a thread of hesitation, like she knew she was stepping into new territory, and she wasn’t entirely sure if she belonged.

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Anthony stretched out in his chair, arms folded loosely. “Tell me more about your merger plan. And what about Louisa’s shoes? You still looking for someone to fill them?”

I exhaled, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck. “It’s... in motion.”

Juliette shifted in her seat, sliding her tablet forward. “We’ve been talking,” she said, her voice even but laced with purpose. “And I think there’s a way to steady the ship without forcing Damian to pull a miracle out of thin air.”

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. “We?”

Juliette gave a small, self-deprecating smile. “Reliable Art Services. And before anyone panics—no, I’m not gunning for Louisa’s job.” She glanced at me, then back to them. “I’m not an executive. I’m not here for a paycheck. But I do have clients, connections, and a pretty good reputation in the art world—and I’m willing to volunteer some of that weight on weekends to help right this ship.”

She tapped the tablet. “Estate consultations. Appraisals. Helping families who don’t know what to do with inherited art. And on the flip side—helping Vérité’s donors feel like they’re part of something meaningful again. Not just a black-tie event, but a movement that actually connects art with community.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Anthony sat forward slowly, steepling his fingers. “You’d do that as a volunteer.”

Juliette's smile softened. "I care about this place. And Damian. And you know what? If it helps keep this foundation alive, I'm in."

My chest tightened, something raw and unexpected pressing behind my ribs.

Anthony's mouth twitched, like he was holding back a grin. "Well, damn. That's... exactly what the board's been starving for."

I caught Juliette's eye, something unspoken hanging between us, sharp as a live wire. She was offering herself, not as a lifeboat, but as an anchor. And maybe for the first time, I realized I wanted to be anchored.

Anthony turned to me, mock-serious. "And you, Sinclair? Are you prepared to be outshone by your volunteer staff?"

I grinned. "Oh, I'm all in."

Gabrielle clapped her hands once, bright and satisfied. "Well, dear, perhaps we should get back home. Aria can only stay a few hours."

Anthony nodded in agreement. They grabbed a few leftover pastries and were gone.

Juliette commandeered the whiteboard back at the office like she'd been born for it. Markers in hand, hair tied up in a messy knot, she sketched circles and arrows, names of donors, potential auction items, and possible themes spilling across the board in loops of bold handwriting.

I leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, watching her work. For a moment, I wasn't thinking about the board, the gala, or the fallout from the last few weeks. I was just watching Juliette—sharp, focused, flushed with purpose.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching me mid-smirk. “Are you going to help, or just stand there looking smug?”

I raised my hands in mock surrender. “I’m taking notes. You’re a force of nature.”

Juliette rolled her eyes, though a smirk played on her lips. “We need items that spark real interest—big-ticket, one-of-a-kind experiences, not just another silent auction basket stuffed with wine and cheese. Think private tours, dinner with collectors, and exclusive gallery previews. And we need donors with serious reach. Anthony mentioned he’s working on recovering a piece from the Devereux’s stolen collection. Maybe we can feature it. The Monuments Men and Women Foundation is about to wrap up their search for the original owner, but so far, they’ve come up empty.”

She tapped the marker against her lip, eyes gleaming with mischief. “You’ve got the Rolodex, Sinclair. Don’t make me charm it out of you.”

I leaned back in my chair, grinning slowly. “Oh, I’m counting on you to try.”

I pushed off the doorframe, crossing to where she stood. “I’ll make some calls. Anthony can help, too—he’s got a couple of collectors in his pocket who owe him favors.” I reached past her to pick up a pen, close enough to catch the faint scent of her shampoo. “You’re good at this.”

Juliette let out a soft laugh, not looking at me. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

I ducked my head, brushing a kiss against her temple before I could second-guess myself. “Not surprised. Impressed.”

Her breath hitched, just for a second, before she shook it off and tapped another note onto the board.

We worked for another hour, the energy between us humming like a live current. She called Gabrielle twice to bounce ideas. I texted Anthony, looping him in on some of the higher-profile donors. Somewhere between organizing art lots and debating whether the dress code should be black tie or cocktail chic, Juliette turned, hands on her hips, eyes bright.

“This could actually work,” she murmured.

I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers through hers without thinking. “You’re the one making it work.”

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She tilted her head, studying me. “You know... you have a reputation, Damian Sinclair. Cool. Unshakable. Charming, when you want to be.”

I raised a brow. “When I want to be?”

Juliette smiled softly. “But under all that, you care. I see it. And you can’t fake that, and that’s one thing I love about you.”

I squeezed her hand once. “You’re dangerous, you know that?” I murmured, half a laugh in my throat.

Her smile deepened. “You like it.”

I exhaled, gently kissing her forehead. “Yeah,” I whispered, the truth escaping my lips unintentionally, “I love... it.” But as soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted not being able to simply say:

“Juliette, I love you, not just for your help or our friendship.”

By the time we wrapped up at Vérité, the city was slipping into night—headlights streaking down the boulevard, the air thick with that unmistakable Miami buzz of music, laughter, and distant waves.

Juliette brushed her hair back, tablet tucked under her arm as we headed for the door.

“So,” I said, falling into step beside her, “where do you want to eat?”

She glanced over, one brow lifting with a sly smile. “Are you asking me out, Sinclair?”

I smirked. “Maybe I’m asking us out. You’ve earned it.”

Her smile softened. “Somewhere with wine.”

“Done.” I pulled out my phone. “What if we loop in Gabrielle and Anthony?”

Her eyes flickered with surprise, pleased, maybe even a little touched. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I murmured, brushing a hand down her back, “why not? Let’s make it a night.”

Juliette texted Gabrielle, and within seconds, her phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and laughed. “They’re in. Aria is saving up for her first car and practically ran over to their house.”

I chuckled. “Resourceful family.”

“Yeah, but Gabrielle won’t have her for long. The family is moving to Orlando and they’re selling their home.”

“Humm. I haven’t seen the listing yet,” I muttered, making a mental note to watch for it.

We headed to Cipriani’s, where the four of us slipped into a corner booth, the city glittering through the windows behind us. The table hummed with easy conversation—Anthony ribbing me about selling off a California condo to save The Cut of Her Jib, Gabrielle teasing Juliette about how she was already turning the gala auction into her personal art crusade.

For once, I let myself lean back and just watch it all—their laughter, Juliette’s eyes lighting up as she talked about Reliable Art Services, Gabrielle resting her chin on Anthony’s shoulder.

Then, just as the waiter arrived to take our drink order, Gabrielle cleared her throat.

“Actually,” she said, her cheeks flushing pink, “I’ll skip the wine.”

Juliette blinked, lowering her menu. “What? Gabrielle, you never skip the wine.”

Anthony grinned, sliding an arm around his wife. “We, uh... we just got the call from the lab.”

Gabrielle’s fingers found Anthony’s and squeezed. “The IVF worked.” Her voice trembled on the last word, eyes shining. “I’m pregnant.”

For a heartbeat, everything froze.

Juliette’s lips parted and her eyes were wide. She reached across the table and grabbed Gabrielle’s hand, her fingers trembling slightly as she squeezed. “Gabby... oh my God.” Her voice cracked—half laughter, half something rawer, thinner.

“I wanted to tell you first,” Gabrielle said softly, glancing between us, “but we just found out an hour ago. It didn’t feel real until now.”

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Juliette smiled, bright and wobbly all at once. “I’m so happy for you.” She laughed under her breath, brushing a quick finger under her eye. “I really am.”

Beside me, Anthony beamed, clinking his water glass against mine. “Guess it’s sparkling water all around for the mom-to-be.”

I leaned in, catching Juliette’s gaze. There was a flicker there—a shadow of something unspoken. She lifted her chin and gave me the smallest nod, as if to say, I’m okay.

But later, when our knees brushed under the table and I felt her fingers slip into mine, I knew better.

Somewhere between the congratulations and the clinking glasses, Juliette’s laughter softened, like a girl trying to remember how to carry joy in both hands without letting the sharp edges cut too deep.

God help me. All I wanted at that moment was to carry it for her, but I didn’t know where to start.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Juliette

A Few Weeks Later

I crossed my legs, uncrossed them, and crossed them again, my foot tapping an

anxious rhythm on the linoleum floor. The doctor's office waiting room smelled like a strange mix of lavender air freshener and disinfectant, and the magazines on the table were at least a year old.

Across from me, Gabrielle sat with her arms draped casually over the back of the chair, watching me with that infuriating twin-sister grin.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor, Jules," she teased, tipping her head toward my jittering foot. "Or at least burn through the heel of that shoe."

I forced a tight smile and tried to still my leg. "I'm fine."

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Sure."

I stared down at my hands, twisting the thin silver ring on my index finger. The silence stretched between us, heavy and uncomfortable, until I blurted, "Do you think I'd be a good mom?"

Gabrielle's face softened, though a wicked little glint still sparked in her eyes. "Oh, you'd be terrifying."

I barked out a surprised laugh. "Gee, thanks."

She smirked. "No, seriously—you'd be amazing. But let's be real. You'd have color-coded calendars, meal preps, bedtime checklists, and probably a tiny art collection curated for the nursery by the time the poor kid was six months old."

I rolled my eyes but felt the tight knot in my chest loosen just a little. "So... you're saying I'm neurotic but well-meaning?"

"Exactly." Gabrielle reached over and squeezed my hand. "But you've got the biggest

heart, Jules. You'd love that baby like no one else. Don't doubt that."

I looked away, blinking fast. "Yeah, well... even if I wanted it, it's not like it's that simple."

Gabrielle's thumb brushed over my knuckles. "If you're thinking about all this, about a future, about Damian..." She trailed off, letting the silence finish the sentence.

I stiffened. "It's not—Damian and I—" I shook my head. "He asks, okay? He's asked. About the tests. About IVF. But he's never said anything more. He's supportive on paper, but... I don't know."

Gabrielle's expression turned gentle, all the teasing gone. "Maybe you don't know because you won't let him show you."

My throat tightened. "Gabby..."

"I know, I know." She leaned back, lifting her hands in surrender. "I'm just saying — you're not the only one scared of this, Jules. And maybe it's time you two stop dancing around it."

Before I could find an answer—any answer—the nurse's voice called from the hallway. "Juliette Vandenburg?"

I shot Gabrielle a quick, nervous look. She just smiled and reached for my hand. "Let's go see what's next."

The air inside the consultation room felt different—heavier, quieter, like the walls were bracing themselves for whatever came next. I slid onto the edge of the chair, the paper crinkling beneath me, the antiseptic scent of the room sharp in the back of my throat. Gabrielle sat down beside me, her hand slipping into mine without a word.

Dr. Klein came in moments later, her white coat crisp, her expression practiced. She smiled—soft but professional—and greeted us by name. I tried to focus on the sound of her voice, the gentle rhythm of it, but all I could hear was the wild fluttering of my own heartbeat.

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“Juliette, thank you for your patience,” she began, settling onto her stool across from us. She folded her hands, and I noticed how calm they looked—not a tremor, not a flicker of hesitation. I wondered if she’d practiced that, the art of still hands.

“I’ve had the chance to review all your test results,” she continued, glancing briefly at the folder in front of her. “And I want to start by saying you’ve done everything right so far. You were proactive, you got the testing done early, and that gives us the best possible information moving forward.”

Beside me, Gabrielle’s fingers tightened slightly around mine. I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry.

The doctor’s voice softened just a touch. “As you know, we were looking closely at ovarian reserve, tubal function, and general reproductive health. And unfortunately, Juliette, the tests confirmed what we were concerned about.” She paused—not long, but long enough for the words to land like a stone in my stomach.

“You have diminished ovarian reserve. That means the quantity and quality of your eggs are lower than expected for your age. The ovaries aren’t producing as many healthy, viable eggs, and over time, that reduces the chances of natural conception. And could eventually reduce the chance of you carrying a baby. It’s one of the most common reasons women struggle to get pregnant as they get older, and it can make it much harder for fertilization to happen the conventional way, even with regular cycles.”

I felt the air rush out of my chest, like someone had pulled a string and let the whole balloon collapse. My fingers clenched instinctively, nails digging into Gabrielle’s

hand. She didn't flinch. She just held on tighter.

The doctor kept talking, the words blurring slightly at the edges. I caught fragments—"not your fault... common among women with your profile.... not the end of the road." My mind spun, skidding over all of it like a stone skipping across water.

"I know this is difficult news," the doctor said gently. "But there's also very good news here. Your uterus and general reproductive health are excellent. You're an ideal candidate for in vitro fertilization."

I blinked. The words felt foreign, like they belonged to someone else's story, someone else's body. Gabrielle let out a shaky breath beside me, her thumb brushing against my skin in slow, grounding circles.

"With IVF, we bypass the natural process by stimulating the ovaries to produce multiple eggs, retrieving them, and fertilizing them in a lab before transferring the embryo to the uterus. Given your results, we have every reason to believe you'd respond very well to treatment just like your twin has."

I nodded faintly, though I wasn't sure if I was nodding in understanding or just to keep from falling apart. My mind was already spinning ahead, stumbling over words like "donor" and "timelines," even as the doctor reassured me that my chances were good.

For a moment, the room went very still. I became acutely aware of everything: the faint buzz of the overhead light, the cool edge of the exam table against my leg, the soft, almost imperceptible hitch in Gabrielle's breathing.

I turned my head slightly toward her, and when our eyes met, it was like looking into a mirror that knew exactly what I was feeling. Her own history, her own heartbreak

— it was all there in the way she squeezed my hand, in the way her eyes softened.

“We’ll get through this,” she murmured. “Whatever you want to do, Jules—we’ll get through it.”

I swallowed hard, willing myself not to cry, not here, not yet. But something inside me cracked anyway, a small fracture I couldn’t quite contain. My throat burned with all the words I wasn’t sure how to say.

I turned back to the doctor, managing a shaky breath. “Can you... walk me through the next steps?”

The doctor gave a small, encouraging smile. “Of course. We’ll take it one step at a time.”

One step at a time. I let the words settle, tasting them carefully.

For the first time in weeks, maybe longer, the tight, suffocating knot in my chest loosened just a little.

The late afternoon sunlight spilled across the sidewalk as we stepped out of the doctor’s office, and for a second, I just stood there, eyes closed, letting the cool air hit my face. It smelled faintly of car exhaust and blooming jasmine from the landscaping, but it was sharp and real, and right now, I needed that.

Gabrielle shifted beside me, looping her arm through mine. “So,” she said softly, “on a scale of one to ‘burn it all down,’ where are we landing today?”

I huffed out something that might have been a laugh or just a breath that had nowhere else to go. “Somewhere in the middle,” I murmured. “Like... smoldering ashes, maybe.”

She squeezed my arm, leaning her head lightly against my shoulder as we walked toward the parking lot. “I’m proud of you, Jules. I know you’re probably too stubborn to hear it, but I am.”

My phone buzzed inside my purse—a sharp vibration that cut right through my fog. Without thinking, I pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

Damian: Thinking about you. How did it go?

My thumb hovered over the screen, heart stuttering in my chest. I stared at the message like it was written in a foreign language, something I couldn’t quite translate.

Gabrielle tilted her head to peek. “You going to tell him,” she murmured, “or are you going to keep pretending you’ve got this all under control?”

I let out a shaky breath, thumb grazing the edge of the screen—then I clicked it off and slid the phone back into my purse.

“Jules,” Gabrielle said quietly, “you don’t have to do this alone.”

I gave a weak smile, more out of habit than conviction. “Maybe I do.”

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We reached her car, and Gabrielle spun to face me, her expression gentler now, the teasing edge softening into something closer to worry. “Look,” she said, brushing a lock of hair from my face, “if you decide things with Damian aren’t going to work out—if you want to go this alone—I will be your emotional support animal.”

That pulled a real laugh from me, sharp and surprised. “What, you’re going to get one of those little service vests and follow me around airports?”

She grinned. “Absolutely. I’ll wear a patch. ‘Certified Support Twin.’ I’ll bark at anyone who looks at you sideways.”

I shook my head, eyes burning, but the absurdity of it lightened my heart. “You’re ridiculous.”

Gabrielle’s smile softened. “Yeah, but you love me for it.”

I swallowed hard, glancing toward the horizon, where the sun was already dipping low. “It’s just... different, Gabby. You have Anthony. You have your person. I don’t know what Damian is to me right now.”

Gabrielle’s voice dropped to something quieter, more serious. “Your situation is different, yeah. But that doesn’t mean you have to shut him out. Let him in, Jules. Or at least give him the chance.”

I exhaled slowly, the weight of the conversation pressing against my ribs. “I’m scared,” I admitted before I could stop myself. The words tasted strange in my mouth—raw and unpolished. “I’m scared to need something from him he can’t give

me.”

Gabrielle reached for my hand, her fingers cool and sure. “Then let’s figure it out together. Whatever you choose—Damian or no Damian, baby or no baby—you’re not doing it by yourself.”

For a beat, the two of us just stood there, the quiet hum of traffic filling the spaces between our words.

I gave her hand a squeeze, drawing in a breath that tasted a little less like fear and a little more like resolve. “Okay,” I whispered. “Okay.”

We started walking again, arm in arm, Gabrielle’s head bumping gently against my shoulder. My phone stayed silent, Damian’s message still waiting—a conversation I knew I couldn’t avoid forever.

But for this one moment, I let it wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Damian

The glow of my laptop screen lit up the dark office, casting pale light over the mess of papers spread across my desk. An email draft blinked at me—half-written, scattered thoughts about a deal I should’ve wrapped up hours ago—but my fingers hovered uselessly above the keys. My eyes kept drifting, drawn repeatedly to the phone beside my keyboard.

Juliette: Can we talk?

Three simple words from Juliette, and I was completely undone.

I leaned back in my chair, exhaling hard as I raked a hand through my hair. I'd spent the entire day trying to bury myself in work, pretending the mountain of contracts and client updates would be enough to keep my mind occupied. It hadn't.

Because no matter how many reports I pretended to read, all I could see was Juliette, sitting in that sterile doctor's office, waiting for answers I couldn't give her.

My jaw tightened. I remembered the moment on the plane, the two of us seated comfortably in the private jet, a bottle of wine between us, when she'd turned to me with that deceptively light tone and asked if I'd ever consider being a sperm donor. I'd laughed it off—made some throwaway comment—and she'd smiled, but not really. The visit to Germany went downhill after that brief conversation.

And now, because of her, the gallery was experiencing an influx of business, new donors lining up to purchase tickets to the upcoming gala. Juliette hadn't just helped revitalize the event—she'd breathed life into the entire operation, drawing in a crowd we hadn't been able to reach before. She was brilliant, magnetic, impossible to ignore. And somehow, I was still the man she came to with her quiet, aching questions.

She hadn't been joking. Not then.

And I'd known it.

I stared at the phone again, the guilt pressing sharp and cold behind my ribs. She was facing the biggest decision of her life, staring down a future that terrified her, and the whole time, I'd been keeping Mateo buried like some dirty secret. A son I'd never planned for, never expected—but who existed all the same. And Juliette had no idea.

My throat tightened, and I squeezed my eyes shut for a beat, willing the pressure behind them to ease.

This wasn't me. I wasn't the man who froze up when it mattered. I wasn't the man who lied by omission, who kept walls up when the person on the other side had already trusted me with more than I deserved.

But somehow, with Juliette, I was.

I pushed back from the desk, the chair groaning quietly beneath me. My hands scrubbed over my face, rough with end-of-day stubble, and for a second, I just sat there in the dark, the city lights flickering faintly through the window.

Maybe this was the moment everything broke. Maybe I'd already crossed the line.

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But as much as the thought gutted me, what terrified me more was the idea of doing nothing. Of letting her walk through this alone, carrying the weight of a decision I'd helped create, and not being there when she needed me most.

I opened my eyes, the edges of the room coming back into focus, and let out a slow, shaky breath.

This wasn't sustainable. Sooner or later, something had to give.

And maybe... I was discovering what being in love felt like.

The streets were quiet as I pulled up in front of the Devereux Gallery, the sleek exterior glowing under soft lights. It was too late for anyone except the cleaning crew, but Anthony's office light was still on. Typical.

I killed the engine and sat for a moment, hands resting on the wheel, watching the way the light spilled onto the sidewalk. I hadn't planned to come here. Hell, I hadn't planned anything past burying myself in spreadsheets and pretending Juliette's text wasn't burning a hole in my phone.

But here I was. And maybe that was the right call for once.

Inside, the gallery was hushed and echoing, the quiet that settled in after hours, when the last visitors were gone, and the art seemed to exhale. I found Anthony in his office, leaning over his desk with a phone to his ear, a glass of bourbon within reach. When he looked up and saw me in the doorway, he waved me in without missing a beat.

“Sinclair,” he murmured into the phone, wrapping up whatever call he was on. “Yeah. We’ll circle back tomorrow. Thanks.”

He hung up, gave me a once-over, and reached for another glass.

“Didn’t expect to see you tonight,” he said, pouring a generous measure before sliding it across the desk. “Trouble in paradise, or are you just here for the good stuff?”

I took the glass, but I didn’t drink. Instead, I traced the rim with my thumb, watching the liquid catch the light.

“Fundraiser’s shaping up,” I offered, voice low. “Juliette’s got half the city roped into donating something.”

Anthony leaned back in his chair, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Yeah, she’s good at that. Better than I am.”

“She’s good at a lot of things.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Anthony’s eyes sharpened, and just like that, the easy conversation cooled a few degrees. “Gabrielle said she was at the doctor’s today.”

I nodded, feeling the weight settle heavier on my shoulders.

“And?” he prodded.

I shook my head. “I don’t know yet. She hasn’t told me.”

Anthony studied me in the dim light, then exhaled quietly, tipping back in his chair. “You’ve been circling something for weeks now, Sinclair. You want to spit it out, or

do we keep dancing around it all night?”

My jaw tightened. I could've laughed it off, could've deflected—God knew I was good at that — but I didn't have the energy tonight.

“I'm... holding something back from her,” I admitted. “Something she deserves to know.”

Anthony's brow lifted slightly, but to his credit, he didn't press. Instead, he reached for his own glass, swirling the bourbon with a thoughtful tilt of his wrist.

“You can't sit on the fence forever, Sinclair,” he said quietly. “If you care about her, you don't get to keep half the truth in your pocket.”

I let out a sharp breath, dragging a hand through my hair as the guilt prickled under my skin. I could feel it in my face, could feel the way my defenses cracked just enough for Anthony to see the strain underneath.

I didn't tell him about Mateo. Couldn't. Not yet.

But I saw the moment Anthony picked up on it anyway—the flicker in his eyes, the subtle tightening of his mouth.

“You're a lot of things, Sinclair,” he murmured, setting his glass down with a softclink. “But you're not a coward. So don't act like one now.”

The words landed deeper than I wanted to admit, cutting past the practiced edges I usually kept in place. I stood slowly, fingers curling briefly around the untouched glass before setting it back on his desk. “Thanks, Anthony.”

He gave a small nod, no smile this time, just steady, measured understanding.

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The cool night air hit me the second I stepped outside, sharp against my skin, cutting through the restless heat humming in my veins. City lights glittered across the windshield of my car, their reflections rippling over the hood as I hit the unlock button.

My phone buzzed in my jacket pocket. I pulled it out, thumb swiping across the screen.

Juliette: Are you free tonight?

For a second, I just stood there on the sidewalk, the sounds of traffic in the distance, the gallery behind me like a ghost. My heart thudded hard in my chest, a beat too fast, too loud, as I stared at those four words.

No more running. No more hiding.

I slid into the driver's seat, the leather cool beneath my hands as I gripped the wheel. My throat was tight, every breath sharp, but under the nerves was something steadier—something that had been missing for weeks.

Resolve.

I fired up the engine, the low growl breaking the quiet, and pulled out of the lot.

The city blurred past in streaks of gold and red, headlights slicing through the dark. I watched the road unfold in front of me, every turn pulling me closer to the one place I needed to be.

It was time. Time to tell her the truth. Time to stop pretending I could hold this all in and still have her.

Whatever came next—the fallout, the forgiveness, or the end—it was all waiting for me at that guest house.

I tightened my grip on the wheel as the streets narrowed, Juliette’s neighborhood pulling into view, the familiar ache of wanting her wrapping around my ribs.

My future was hanging in the balance. And for the first time in a long time, I was ready to face it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Juliette

The soft knock on the door came just as I wrapped my hands tighter around the mug of green tea, the steam curling up to kiss my face. My fingers trembled slightly—not from the heat, but from the bone-deep exhaustion I hadn’t been able to shake since the doctor’s office.

I padded barefoot to the door, robe knotted loosely at my waist, hair half-tamed from the messy knot I’d thrown it into earlier. When I opened the door, there he was.

Damian.

His dark jacket caught the glow of the porch light, his hands tucked into his pockets, that familiar, steady gaze sweeping over me—not with heat, not yet, but with something gentler. Something that made my chest squeeze in ways I wasn’t sure I was ready for.

“Hey,” I murmured, voice smaller than I wanted. “Thanks for coming over.”

He stepped inside without hesitation, his presence filling the space even though he didn’t say a word right away. I closed the door softly behind him, breathing in the faint trace of his cologne, something warm and woodsy that settled low in my stomach.

“I was making tea,” I offered, lifting the mug slightly as if that explained anything. “Green tea. I’m—” I hesitated, feeling suddenly foolish, “—trying to cleanse my body, or something. A reset, I guess.”

His mouth quirked at the corner, just the faintest tug of amusement, but there was no teasing in his eyes. “I could use a cleanse, too,” he murmured, his voice rough around the edges. “Tea sounds good.”

For a beat, I just stood there, blinking at him, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. But he only held my gaze, quiet and steady, and something inside me cracked a little.

I moved toward the kitchen, my bare feet whispering over the floor as I poured him a mug. My hands still shook, but at least they were busy. When I turned, he was already settled on the couch, elbows resting on his knees, watching me with an intensity that made the air feel charged.

I crossed the room, handing him the mug, and when our fingers brushed, the contact jolted through me like a live wire. I sank down beside him, tucking my legs under me, drawing the robe tighter around my body as if it could hold me together.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The only sound was the faint ticking of the antique clock on the wall, the quiet sips of tea, the thud of my heartbeat in my ears.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” I whispered, voice barely above the hush of the room.

Damian turned his head slightly, the lamplight catching in the sharp cut of his jaw.
“You asked.”

And just like that, something in my chest splintered.

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I looked down at my mug, fingers wrapped tight around the ceramic. “I don’t even know where to start,” I admitted. “I keep thinking if I say it all out loud, it’ll make it too real.”

He shifted beside me, just enough that his knee brushed mine—a subtle touch, but grounding, solid.

“I’m here, Jules,” he murmured. “Start wherever you want.”

The words were simple, but they softened something jagged inside me. I drew in a shaky breath, willing myself to speak, to peel back the layers I’d been hiding under all day.

And at that moment, with his quiet weight beside me, I realized this was the first time in a long time that I didn’t feel entirely alone.

I stared into my mug, watching the pale steam curl into the quiet. My fingers flexed around the ceramic like I could somehow pour all the tension in my body into it, like the tea could soak up the fear I couldn’t name out loud.

Damian sat beside me, his elbow resting on the back of the couch, one ankle crossed over his knee. He cradled his mug in one hand, his thumb brushing along the rim in slow, absent strokes. He hadn’t said much, hadn’t pushed, just waited — which somehow unraveled me faster than if he’d demanded answers.

I let out a breath, shaky and thin. “The doctor... confirmed what Gabrielle was already dealing with.” My voice wavered, and I swallowed hard. “Diminished

ovarian reserve. IVF's my best shot."

Saying it out loud felt like opening a floodgate. The words rushed out in a clumsy, tumbling spill. "It's not like I didn't expect it—Gabrielle and I are twins, after all—but hearing it, having a doctor sit across from you and explain your odds in percentages and charts, it's..." I let out a helpless laugh. "It's a lot."

Damian's eyes stayed on me, steady and unflinching. Not pitying, just there. His thumb was still tracing the rim of his mug. For some reason, the small, quiet motion anchored me.

"I thought I'd feel more decisive by now," I admitted. "Like the minute I had the facts, I'd know what to do. But I don't. I just... I keep imagining this life, this future, and I don't even know if it's mine or just something I've been clinging to out of habit."

I felt his hand brush my knee, a light touch, barely there—but it made me suck in a breath, the contact like a match striking against skin.

When I looked up, his gaze was gentle, his mouth pulled into a faint, almost hesitant line. "You don't have to have all the answers tonight, Jules."

I huffed softly, blinking hard. "I don't know how to do this alone."

The admission left me raw, like I'd torn a page from my own chest and handed it to him. My throat tightened, and for a moment, I pressed the edge of the mug to my lips just to have something to do with my shaking hands.

Damian set his mug on the coffee table with a quiet clink. His palm came to rest over mine, still wrapped tight around the tea, and his warmth bled through the cool ceramic.

“I need to tell you something.” His voice was low, rougher now. “Something I should’ve told you sooner.”

I met his gaze, heart pounding, air suddenly thin.

“There’s a child,” he said quietly. “A twelve-year-old son. Mateo. I was a sperm donor once, years ago—before any of this, long before you. His mother passed away, and the court contacted me. Otherwise, I would have never known. And it matters now because I should’ve told you, and I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

The words hit like a bell rung deep in my chest—not a clean break, but a reverberation, a tremor working its way through bone and breath. All I could do was stare at him, my mind trying to fit his new shape into the man I thought I knew.

And yet... I didn’t pull away.

There was a quiet, stubborn thread of understanding somewhere beneath the shock. Of recognition. Because wasn’t that what we both were, underneath it all? People carrying truths we didn’t know how to share.

My eyes stung, and I blinked fast, a shaky laugh slipping out. “Well,” I whispered, “that’s one hell of a cleanse, Sinclair.”

He huffed out something close to a laugh, his mouth curving, and for the first time all night, the tension in his shoulders eased—just a fraction.

With unsteady fingers, I set the mug on the table and pressed my hands to my face, dragging in a breath that felt too sharp. “I’m amess,” I murmured, words muffled against my palms. “I’m such a damn mess. I don’t know what to do.”

When I dropped my hands, Damian was closer, his eyes dark and focused, his thumb

brushing a tear from my cheek before I even realized it had fallen.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he murmured, his voice low, almost rough with restraint.

And just like that, the knot in my chest loosened—not all the way, but enough.

Damian’s fingers lingered at the edge of the robe, the silk parting under his touch like a held breath finally exhaled. My skin prickled in the cool air, but it wasn’t the temperature that sent a shiver through me—it was the way his eyes softened when they swept over me, as if seeing me this way wasn’t about possession or hunger, but something quieter, more reverent.

I felt raw, exposed in every sense, but I didn’t look away.

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His mouth brushed the hollow of my throat, the faintest graze, and I swore the world narrowed to just that single point of contact. My fingers instinctively curled into his shoulders, anchoring myself as if I might float away without him.

“Jules,” Damian murmured, his voice rough and low, the sound of my name breaking something open inside me.

His hands slid slowly down my sides, not rushing, not demanding, just learning me, calming me. And then, without a word, he eased me back against the cushions, his mouth trailing over my collarbone, his fingers teasing the edge of my robe aside until I trembled under his hands.

A soft gasp slipped from my lips when he kissed the inside of my knee, the deliberate press of his mouth sending heat spiraling through me. His hands gripped the backs of my thighs, easing them apart, and the last of my defenses crumbled like paper.

For a moment, I felt suspended—caught between breath and sensation, thought and surrender. And then all I felt was him.

He took his time. Oh God, he took his time. Every slow, coaxing flick of his tongue, every low murmur against my skin unspooled the tight coil in my chest, melting the tension I’d carried for weeks. My hands tangled in his hair, hips arching helplessly toward him as I dissolved into the steady, relentless pleasure he drew from me.

When the release came, it ripped through me with a raw, unsteady sob—not just from the pleasure, but from the sheer, aching relief of being seen, of being held together when I was sure I was coming apart.

Damian kissed his way back up my body, his mouth brushing over the curve of my waist, the rapid thrum of my pulse at the base of my throat. When his eyes met mine again, there was a softness there that undid me all over again—no cocky grin, no swagger, just Damian, stripped bare of everything but the need to be close.

Without a word, he slipped an arm beneath me, lifting me effortlessly from the couch. I buried my face in his neck, breathing him in, letting the solid strength of him anchor me as he carried me toward the bedroom.

At that moment, I realized nothing had been fixed. Nothing was certain. But for the first time, I wanted to believe we might figure it out anyway.

Together.

Damian laid me down on the bed as if I were something precious, his arms cradling me even when the mattress was already beneath my back. The bedroom was dim, the soft glow from the hallway casting faint light across the room, turning the shadows on his face into something almost achingly beautiful.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

He hovered above me, eyes searching mine, his breath uneven, his hands braced on either side of my shoulders as if he were still holding himself back, still giving me a chance to pull away. But I didn't want space, not now. I reached up, tracing my fingers along his jaw, feeling the rough scrape of stubble, the tense line of his mouth.

"I'm still angry," I whispered, the words trembling out of me before I could stop them. "I'm still scared."

His mouth softened at the corners, his eyes dark and steady. "I know." His voice was rough, like gravel and silk all at once. "Me too."

My thumb brushed the edge of his lip, and then I pulled him down to me.

The first kiss was slow. Not hesitant—we were too far past that—but careful, as if we were relearning each other in the quiet. His mouth moved over mine with unhurried purpose, his hands framing my face, thumbs brushing the curve of my cheekbones like he needed to memorize every inch of me.

There was no rush now. No sharp edges, no frantic need to sate the ache between us. Just the slow, steady unraveling of tension as Damian touched me like he had all the time in the world.

My hands found their way beneath his shirt, fingertips tracing over the hard planes of his back, the knot of tension at his shoulders, the faint tremor in his arms when I whispered his name against his skin. He shuddered at the sound, a low groan escaping his throat, and I felt his restraint slip, just a little.

When he finally slipped inside me, it wasn't desperate or frenzied. It was slow, almost reverent—a quiet claiming, a silent promise neither of us dared speak aloud yet. His forehead pressed to mine, his breath mingling with mine, his hands tangled with my own as we moved together in the dark.

I didn't know where we'd go after this, didn't know if the pieces we were clumsily trying to fit back together would hold. But in that moment, in my bedroom, with his body pressed to mine and his mouth brushing soft, shattering kisses against my skin—I let myself believe.

And when the world finally fell away, when the last trembling sigh escaped my lips and his arms closed tight around me, I thought—maybe this was the beginning. Maybe this was what it meant to stop running and finally stay.

For a long time, neither of us spoke.

I could hear the faint dripping from the rain outside my window, the occasional shift of his fingers as they drifted through my hair. It should have felt fragile, this silence—like something waiting to break—but instead it wrapped around us like a cocoon, soft and protective, something I hadn't realized I craved until I had it.

His lips brushed the top of my head, barely there, and I felt the words he didn't say catch in my throat.

I should tell him I'm sorry. I should tell him I'm grateful. I should tell him I'm terrified.

Instead, I let my fingers curl gently against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart beneath my palm, and whispered, "Stay."

Just that. Just one word.

His arm tightened around me, a slow, quiet squeeze that said everything neither of us was brave enough to put into sentences.

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“I’m here, Jules,” Damian murmured, his voice rough and low against my hair. “I’m not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Damian

The smell of eggs and fresh herbs filled the kitchen, a sharp contrast to the usual quiet whirl of the espresso machine I relied on most mornings. I’d never made a veggie omelet in my life—probably hadn’t even cracked an egg in months—but somehow, this morning, it felt like the only thing I could do with my restless hands.

The whisk scraped softly against the side of the bowl as I muttered under my breath, “Thank goodness it’s Saturday.”

It was the kind of morning I never gave myself: unhurried, no conference calls or back-to-back meetings, only a meeting with board members this afternoon to wrap up planning for the gala. For now, it was just me, the sizzle of a pan, and the sounds from the gulls flying over the water outside the kitchen window.

The green tea steeped quietly on the counter, sending thin trails of steam into the air. My mind was clearer than it had been in weeks—sharp enough to know there were no more excuses or side-steps.

I glanced toward the bedroom. The door was still half-closed, and behind it, the faint sound of water running in the shower had gone quiet. My chest tightened just a little, the way it always did when I let myself think too long about her—about the way

she'd curled into me last night, about the way her walls had finally, finally lowered just enough to let me in.

And about the thing I should've said months ago.

I turned back to the stove, flipping the omelet carefully, the edges crisping just enough to make me nod in approval. I wasn't a cook, but something was satisfying in the act of creating something with my hands that wasn't a contract, deal, or win.

A sound behind me—the faint pad of bare feet, the soft rustle of fabric—pulled me from my thoughts.

I didn't turn around right away. Instead, I reached for the plates, letting the moment stretch out, letting my pulse remind me of the weight of what was coming.

"Morning," I murmured as I slid the omelet onto the plate. "Hope you're hungry."

When I finally turned, she was there in the doorway—towel wrapped around her damp hair, loose sundress brushing the tops of her thighs, skin still warm and flushed from the shower.

For half a second, I just looked at her. Not as the woman I'd shared a bed with or bantered with at late-night fundraisers, but as the woman I loved. The woman I wanted more from, and the woman who held my future in her hands.

She offered a crooked, sleepy smile. "You're full of surprises, Sinclair."

I smirked, sliding the plate onto the table. "Don't get used to it. This is probably the pinnacle of my domestic abilities."

She laughed softly, tucking the towel tighter around her hair as she moved into the

room. “I was just going to ask if you wanted coffee, but I remembered you’ve gone full health kick on me.”

I lifted the tea mug and gave it a slight tilt. “Figured we needed to continue the cleanse.” My voice softened as our eyes met. “A total reset.”

Her smile faded, but not in a bad way—more like she was letting herself feel the weight of the morning. The air shifted between us, that gentle pull I’d been circling for months, maybe longer.

As I set the second mug down and pulled out the chair for her, my chest tightened again — not with nerves this time, but with something quieter. Resolve.

Today was the day. No more running. No more half-truths.

I just had to make sure I didn’t screw it up.

She hesitated at the edge of the table, eyes flicking over the mugs, the plates, and then to me.

“You really went for it,” she murmured, something soft curling at the edge of her mouth.

“Figured I’d better feed you before I corner you with all the big, messy conversations we’ve been avoiding,” I said lightly, gesturing for her to sit. “Eat first. Then scare you off.”

She let out a breath of laughter, the kind that cracked something tight in my chest. But when she sat, when I slid into the chair across from her, the air between us shifted.

For a few minutes, we ate in an almost-normal rhythm—the quiet scrape of forks on plates, the faint clink of mugs. But her glances kept drifting up to me, and I knew she felt it too. The push of something unspoken pressing up between us, no longer willing to be ignored.

I set my fork down carefully. “Jules.”

Her head snapped up, eyes wide, like she’d been trying to hold the world still a little longer.

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I took a breath. “How are you leaning?”

Her fingers tightened on the mug, a flicker of nerves across her face. “Toward motherhood,” she said softly. “After Gabrielle and Anthony got married and Julian was born, I realized I wanted a child someday. I wanted the life I’ve been too scared to start.” She swallowed hard. “But I was involved with you... I’ve always told myself you were off-limits. Fun. Safe. Not... permanent. So I put my plans for motherhood on hold. Until Gabrielle’s bad news about a health complication that she and, probably, I had inherited.”

I felt the corner of my mouth tug up—not in amusement, but in quiet understanding.

“I agree—the idea of anything permanent is terrifying. And the complications with your health only make it harder,” I murmured. I let the words settle before adding softly, “I’ve been in love with you longer than I’ve been willing to admit, Jules. But the truth is... I never knew what the hell to do with it.”

Her lips parted slightly, the tip of her tongue darting out to wet them, but she didn’t interrupt. She just... listened.

“My parents—” I stopped, ran a hand through my hair. “My father barely looked at my mother. My mother knew how to smile in public but never in private. I thought love was just... performance. Or something people outgrew.”

Juliette’s gaze softened, a sheen of something glassy slipping into her eyes.

“With you,” I went on, voice lower now, “I learned it can be messy. Loud. Quiet.

Frustrating. Addictive. Real. But I stayed in the easy places with you because I didn't trust myself to handle the hard ones."

She let out a shaky laugh, pressing her fingertips to her lips. "I let you stay there. I let us stay there."

"I know."

Her eyes met mine then, and for a moment, neither of us breathed.

She set her mug down, exhaling slowly. "I want to move forward with IVF, but... I need time. It's not just the physical part—it's the whole damn leap. And I need to know..." She hesitated, voice softening. "I always suspected. About the donor catalog. About you."

I blew out a breath, a sharp huff of a laugh. "Figures you'd see right through me."

A pause stretched between us, and I pushed back slightly in my chair, bracing my forearms on the table. "Jules... I would love to be the father of your—our—child." Her eyes widened, her breath catching, but I kept my voice steady. "But there's something you need to understand. If you want me to be the father... it has to be as your partner. As your husband."

Her lips parted, but I lifted a hand gently.

"I don't need your answer today. Take all the time you need. But if you choose to go the single mom route..." I let the words settle before finishing, "... you'll have to pick someone else."

For a moment, I wondered if I'd shattered whatever fragile thing we were building. But then Juliette's shoulders sagged, a slow, almost relieved smile curving her mouth.

“I love you, Sinclair,” she murmured, shaking her head. “God help me, I do. And I want to meet Mateo. But first—” she let out a huff of laughter, “—we’ve got a gala to finish planning.”

I grinned, reaching across the table, letting my fingers brush hers.

“We’ll plan it,” I murmured. “Together.”

We moved around the kitchen, the clink of dishes and rush of running water filling the space where words had finally settled.

Juliette stood at the sink, her towel now draped over a chair, damp hair curling softly around her face. I dried the plates she handed me, watching the way her fingers moved, the small crease between her brows when she focused — the kind of details I never let myself linger on before, and now couldn’t seem to stop noticing.

“So,” she said, glancing at me from under her lashes, “are you always this handy with a dish towel, or should I be impressed?”

I smirked, bumping her lightly with my shoulder. “Don’t push it, Jules. You’re on borrowed domestic charm.”

She laughed, a low, warm sound that tugged at something deep in my chest.

When the last plate was stacked and the tea mugs were resting on the counter, she turned to face me, hands braced on her hips.

“I meant it, you know,” she said softly. “About loving you.”

I reached out, fingers brushing a damp curl from her cheek, tucking it gently behind her ear.

“I know,” I murmured. “And I meant it, too—all of it. But we’ll take it slow. You’ve got things to figure out. We both do.”

Her lips curved, eyes glinting. “So you’re saying you’re not going anywhere?”

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I leaned in, pressing a kiss to her forehead, lingering there just long enough to feel her exhale.

“Nope,” I whispered against her skin. “Except for Mateo’s elementary school graduation a few months from now. And maybe—” I pulled back slightly, smirking, “—the occasional emergency board meeting when someone screws up the gala seating chart.”

She laughed again, shaking her head as she looped her arms loosely around my waist.

“For the record,” she murmured against my chest, “I can’t wait to meet Mateo. But for now...” She tilted her face up, eyes shining with something both fragile and fierce, “We’ve got a gala to pull off.”

I tightened my arms around her, resting my chin briefly on the top of her head.

“Then let’s pull it off, Jules,” I murmured, smiling into her hair. “And after that... we’ll figure out the rest.”

As we moved to the living room, mugs in hand, I caught the way her fingers brushed mine, the lightness in her laugh, the quiet steel in her gaze.

No promises today. No rings. No headlines.

But we were finally standing at the edge of something real. And this time, I wasn’t going to let us fall apart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Juliette

The lobby doors swung open, and a familiar burst of cool, lightly perfumed air greeted me, carrying the quiet hum of luxury. After texting Gabrielle about Damian's proposal, I exhaled slowly, steadying myself as I stepped inside. It was just Saturday afternoon—just the initial walk-through. Not the gala. Not yet. But the way my chest fluttered; you'd think tonight was opening night.

Inside the ballroom, the hotel staff was already in motion, rolling in carts of linens, setting up sample place settings, and testing the lighting cues we'd painstakingly mapped out. The clink of glasses, the scuff of shoes on polished floors, and the quiet murmur of voices filled the space—a familiar symphony of organized chaos.

I moved along the perimeter, clipboard in hand, checking things off as I went. I probably looked calm, poised, and in control on the outside. But inside, my mind was a restless tide. Half of me calculated table counts and centerpiece placements; the other half circled back to Damian's words from this morning.

I would love to be the father of your—our—child. As your husband.

The thought sent a flip through my stomach, equal parts warmth and panic.

“Okay, superstar.” Gabrielle's voice broke through my haze, light and teasing as she stepped beside me, her own clipboard tucked under one arm. “Tell me you haven't memorized the entire floor plan already.”

I gave her a faint smile. “Maybe.”

She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Anthony and Damian are downstairs

checking in with housekeeping. Pretty sure they're having some kind of alpha-off over the hotel's table linens."

A quiet laugh slipped out of me as I shook my head. "Of course they are."

Gabrielle leaned in slightly as we reached the stage area. "So..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, eyes glinting with mischief. "Have you figured out what you're going to say to him yet?"

My throat tightened. "Not yet."

She arched a brow. "Jules."

"I know." I let out a slow breath, glancing over my notes without really seeing them. "I just... want it to be right. I want it to come from me. Not in the middle of chaos, not when we're both still figuring out what this even is."

Gabrielle's mouth curved into a small, knowing smile. "The gala."

I shot her a warning look, but a reluctant laugh escaped. "We aren't making a spectacle out of this at the gala."

"Who said anything about a spectacle?" she teased, looping her arm through mine. "I'm just saying... sometimes the most unforgettable moments happen when you least expect them."

We moved across the ballroom, ticking off details as we went—lighting, sound, menu confirmations, hotel room block—and all the while, my mind kept tugging back to him. Damian, downstairs, probably grumbling over charger plates, and the quiet, steady promise in his eyes when he'd looked at me that morning.

I wasn't ready to give him an answer yet. But I was getting there.

When we pulled away from the hotel, the sun had dipped low, casting the streets in that golden light that made everything feel a little more cinematic, a little less real. I let my head rest back against the seat, thinking we were heading straight to the guest house, until Damian flicked on his turn signal at a street that was a couple of blocks shy of mine.

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“Where are we going?” I asked, half-laughing, half-suspicious.

He shot me a sideways grin, one hand relaxed on the wheel. “You’ll see. I have a surprise. Consider it... a deal sweetener.”

My stomach flipped, but I kept my voice light. “That’s a dangerous promise, Sinclair.”

A few minutes later, he pulled into a long, curved driveway framed by old oaks. The house came into view slowly—first the wrought iron gates, then the manicured hedges, and then the mansion itself: sprawling stone, tall windows, ivy creeping along one side like it had been here forever but was determined to stay modern. My breath caught.

“This,” I whispered, “is stunning.”

Damian cut the engine, slipping out of the car before I could fully gather my thoughts. When he rounded to open my door, he was grinning like a man who had been sitting on the world’s best secret.

I climbed out slowly, still staring. “Wait... is this...?”

He dangled a set of keys with a little flourish. “Perks of being a real estate tycoon. I put down earnest money an hour ago.”

My jaw dropped. “You bought this?”

“Technically, I have six weeks to close before the contract falls through,” he said, slipping the keys into the lock. “So, you know what that means, Jules—I don’t plan to live here alone.”

He pushed open the door, and we stepped into a grand foyer flooded with soft light from a crystal chandelier. A curved staircase swept up one side, dark wood gleaming under our feet.

I spun slowly in place, taking it all in: the formal dining room just off the entrance, its bay windows spilling sunlight over the hardwood; a kitchen straight out of a magazine, all marble and polished brass; a sunken living room with built-ins and a stone fireplace that made me want to curl up and never leave.

Damian gave me a gentle nudge. “Come on, there’s more.”

We moved through the house—a home office with wall-to-wall shelves, a sunroom with glass doors opening onto a terrace, a primary suite with a fireplace and walk-in closet that made me dizzy, and an adorable nursery—complete with a nanny’s apartment.

The evening air wrapped around us when we stepped outside, fragrant with blooming jasmine. The backyard stretched wide, edged by old trees, with a stone path leading to a swimming pool. Beyond that, a garden—overgrown now, but with the bones of something beautiful.

I hugged myself, laughing under my breath. “This is where Gabrielle’s teenage babysitter lived with her parents,” I murmured, turning to him.

Damian leaned against the railing, watching me with a small, private smile. “I want us to have a home, Jules, near your sister. For you, for the baby—when you’re ready.”

My heart squeezed so tightly I could barely catch my breath. I turned back to the house, letting the moment settle in my chest, thick and sweet and terrifying.

When we returned to the guest house, darkness had completely enveloped the surroundings. And as we stepped out of the car, Damian discreetly retrieved a hefty folder from beneath the passenger seat, a mischievous grin spreading across his face as if he were unveiling a hidden treasure.

“What’s that?” I asked as we walked toward the front door, curiosity already bubbling.

“Just a little something to help you visualize the future,” he teased, tapping the folder against his palm.

Once inside, he spread the brochures across the coffee table—glossy layouts, photos, and financing details fanned out like a real estate jackpot. I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head as I watched him proudly shuffle through them, pointing out his favorite features like a kid with a new toy.

By the time we finished showering together, the brochures had migrated—a few under our arms as we carried drinks to bed, a few more I’d scooped up when tidying the couch, and soon they were scattered across the covers in a messy, colorful fan.

Damian dropped onto the mattress with a sigh, propping himself up on his elbows as he flicked through one of the brochures. I slipped in beside him, tucking my legs under the blanket, watching his profile as he pretended to study the fine print.

“You know,” I murmured, voice low and teasing, “you’re very confident for a man who hasn’t actually heard a yes.”

His lips twitched, the corner pulling into that slow, familiar smirk. “Am I?”

I leaned in just enough to let my hair brush his shoulder. “Mmhmm.”

He closed the brochure slowly, turning to face me, his eyes dark and soft all at once. “Take all the time you need, Jules. I’m not in a rush,” he said quietly, brushing his thumb along my jaw.

My heart stumbled again, tightening in a terrifying and beautiful way. But I managed a teasing smile as I whispered, “Good... because you’re not sleeping in your own bed anymore.”

His laugh rumbled low in his chest as he pulled me in, the brochures slipping one by one to the floor, but not forgotten.

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“So, are you saying I need to put my penthouse on the market, along with the property in Malibu?” he teased, his voice warm against my ear.

“Suit yourself, Sinclair,” I murmured, nestling closer, “but just remember—I don’t come with a tentative contract.”

He let out a soft huff of laughter, pressing a kiss to my temple.

“Good,” he whispered, his breath brushing my skin, “because I don’t plan on cancelling it.”

And with that, the weight of decisions, deadlines, and ‘maybes’ melted away, leaving just the quiet sound of his heartbeat under my cheek and the feeling of home, wherever we were.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Damian

One Week Later

The first thing that hit me was the noise—not the loud, clattering kind, but the hum of wealth, elegance, and expectation all tangled together. Glasses clinked softly, laughter floated through the air, and somewhere near the stage, a string quartet played a low, refined arrangement that made the whole place feel like it belonged on the cover of *Architectural Digest*.

I stepped into the ballroom, smoothing one hand down the front of my jacket. Black tie, polished cufflinks, shoes that gleamed under the chandeliers. Outwardly, I probably looked like every other man in this room—cool, collected, at home in all this shine.

Inside? I was anything but.

My gaze swept the space, taking in the opulent floral arrangements, the gilded details on the ceiling, the crush of bodies in designer gowns and custom tuxedos. The media clustered near the entrance, cameras poised, eyes sharp for a story. Waitstaff floated by with champagne flutes balanced on silver trays.

And somewhere in this glittering crowd was Juliette.

I caught sight of Gabrielle and Anthony near the bar, chatting with Lucas and Ella Devereux. Anthony's arm was slung casually around Gabrielle's waist; Lucas, ever the polished gallery prince, was deep in conversation with Ella, who gave a soft laugh that carried over the music. I nodded slightly, Anthony catching my eye for half a second, just long enough to flash me a knowing grin.

Be ready, he'd said earlier this afternoon.

My fingers brushed the ring box in my pocket, the cool edges grounding me for a moment. I hadn't let myself think about this part too much. Hell, I'd spent years carefully keeping people at arm's length—turning relationships into distractions, not commitments. But with Juliette? It had never been just a distraction. It had been everything, long before I'd had the guts to admit it.

I moved toward the edge of the room, slipping out of the direct line of cameras, needing a moment to breathe. From here, I could see the stage—the massive Klimt painting flanked by soft golden lights, the shimmering drape of the curtains, the

subtle hum of anticipation rippling through the crowd.

Is this really happening?

The thought slid through me like a pulse of heat and cold all at once. I'd spent my life calculating risk, reading the odds, keeping the upper hand. But with Juliette? I was gambling with something real, something I couldn't control.

I slipped my hand back into my pocket, fingers closing around the small velvet box like it was a lifeline. Maybe this was the moment I got everything I never thought I'd deserve. Maybe, for once, the risk was worth the reward.

And God help me, I'd never wanted to win something more.

The murmur of voices faded as the lights dimmed, and a hush swept through the ballroom—the kind that raises goosebumps, even in a room full of people used to pretending they've seen it all.

Onstage, Lucas and Ella Devereux stepped into the glow of the spotlight, poised and polished, the perfect picture of old money charm and quiet authority. Ella's gown shimmered in the light as she moved to the microphone, her expression gracious, her voice carrying easily over the hush.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began, smiling, "on behalf of the Devereux Gallery, it's my great honor to present to you tonight one of the most extraordinary recoveries of our lifetime—Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*."

A ripple moved through the crowd—a soft intake of breath, the shifting of bodies, the tilt of heads toward the massive painting displayed behind the stage. The gilded surface caught the light like fire, the delicate, almost haunting face of Adele shimmering in the frame. Even from across the room, I felt the pull of it—the way

true art had a way of pinning you to the spot, making the world narrow to a single, breathless moment.

Ella continued, her voice smooth and steady. “This piece is not only a masterpiece of the early twentieth century—it’s a symbol of survival, restitution, and righting history’s wrongs. As many of you know, this is the final piece recovered from Alistair Devereux’s secret collection, thanks to the combined efforts of the Monuments Men and Women Foundation, the Devereux team, and our partners at Vérité.”

I felt something catch in my chest—a rare, hard-earned flicker of pride. We’d built Vérité from the ground up, Juliette and I. What had started as an ambitious gamble had become something real, something that mattered. And standing here now, watching this moment unfold, I couldn’t help but think: We did this. She did this.

Ella gestured toward the front row, where a thin, silver-haired man stood. “Please join me in welcoming Mr. Franz Switzer, heir to the Bloch-Bauer family estate.”

Polite applause rippled through the crowd as Franz rose, giving a modest nod. When the mic was passed to him, he spoke only briefly, his voice quiet but firm. “It has been a long road to bring Adele home. And while parting with this piece is bittersweet, I believe in the mission of restitution. All proceeds from the sale will go toward recovering other stolen works around the world.”

The crowd responded with warm applause—a rare, genuine moment among the usual polished smiles and air kisses.

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The lights shifted, and the auctioneer's voice floated out over the room, smooth and practiced. "We are now opening silent bidding for Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I best known as The Woman in Gold. Please see the attendants circulating with tablets to place your silent bids."

The media moved like sharks, cameras flashing, reporters murmuring into their phones, pens scratching across notepads. I watched it all from my quiet spot near the back, feeling the strange weight of the moment settle into my chest.

Look how far we've come.

Vérité had started as a shot in the dark and soon became a chance for Juliette to prove herself, as well as a way for me to tether myself to something that mattered. Now it was more than a foundation. It was a legacy. And as much as I hated to admit it, I never would have had the guts to make it happen without her. Tonight, if Anthony was right, Juliette was about to prove once again that she was braver than I'd ever been.

The soft buzz of conversation built back up as the bidding opened, but my attention had narrowed to one point in the room—the small figure moving gracefully toward the stage.

Juliette.

For a second, all the air seemed to thin out of the ballroom. The music, the murmurs, the cameras, the polished laughter faded to a faint echo as she stepped into the spotlight.

She wore a deep emerald gown that caught the light like water, her hair swept up, and a small smile bloomed on her lips as she crossed the stage. My fingers tightened around the ring box in my pocket, and my pulse thrummed in my ears.

She reached the microphone and waited as the crowd quieted, her gaze sweeping over the room, meeting familiar faces, steady and calm in a way that made my chest ache with something fierce and raw.

“Thank you all for being here tonight,” she began, her voice clear, smooth, carrying easily across the ballroom. “Your support means the world—not just to the Vérité Foundation, but to the countless families and communities who are still searching for what was taken from them. You are helping us bring those pieces home.”

Applause rippled through the room. She waited, graceful, poised—the consummate professional.

But then... she shifted slightly, a spark lighting in her eyes, the kind that only a handful of us knew.

“And there’s one more announcement I’d like to make tonight,” she said, her voice softening just slightly, just enough to make the room lean in. My breath hitched in my throat.

Her eyes flicked across the crowd and landed on me.

“Damian Sinclair...” she said, a small, almost mischievous smile breaking free, “I accept your marriage proposal.”

For a beat, the room froze.

Then all at once, the sound rushed back—laughter, cheers, applause, the sharp burst

of camera flashes, a champagne glass shattering somewhere near the back.

I didn't think. I just moved.

My shoes sounded against the floor as I crossed the room in long, sure strides, every nerve buzzing. I barely registered Gabrielle and Anthony beaming from backstage, or Ella's delighted laugh as she stepped aside. All I saw was Juliette, glowing under the lights, eyes wide and shining as I reached her.

I pulled the ring box from my pocket, flipping it open with a flick of my thumb. Her breath caught, and I smiled.

"How did you know—?" she started, a laugh breaking her shock.

"Let's just say," I murmured as I took her hand, "It's serendipity."

The ring slid onto her finger, and for a moment the world tilted—cheers rising around us, cameras flashing, but all I could focus on was the feel of her hand in mine, the soft, disbelieving laugh that slipped from her lips as she shook her head.

"You're impossible," she whispered.

"You should be used to it by now, Jules," I murmured, pressing a brief, fierce kiss to her temple.

As the crowd roared, I caught a glimpse of Judge Valencia moving toward the stage, his wife at his side, both of them smiling wide enough to split the room.

And just like that, I thought as I curled my arm around Juliette's waist, everything I never thought I deserved was standing right here, holding my hand.

The applause was still rippling through the ballroom, and Juliette's fingers were tight around mine, her cheeks flushed, when Judge Valencia took the stage.

He tapped the microphone lightly, the room quieting with a soft ripple of laughter. His wife, elegant in deep sapphire, stood just behind him, her eyes shining as she watched the crowd—or maybe just the two of us, standing center stage like the world had tilted in our favor.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the judge began, his voice warm, a touch of mischief slipping into his smile, “I was asked to keep this brief, which, as my wife will tell you, is not one of my particular talents.”

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A chuckle spread through the room. Juliette squeezed my hand, her eyes flicking to mine with a glimmer of amusement.

“But tonight,” Judge Valencia continued, “isn’t just a celebration of art, or even a celebration of the remarkable work the Vérité Foundation has done in the world of restitution. No—tonight, we also have the joy of witnessing what I think may be Damian Sinclair’s best-kept secret.”

The crowd murmured, a few knowing laughs bubbling up.

The judge grinned. “A secret merger, some might say.”

The words landed like a perfectly timed punchline, sending fresh laughter and applause rolling through the room.

Juliette let out a soft laugh beside me, her head dipping for a moment, her hair brushing my shoulder.

“You two have built something extraordinary together,” the judge went on, his voice softening as he turned slightly toward us, “not just here, but in each other. The Vérité Foundation has become a bright light on the hill for the art world—a reminder that even the past’s deepest shadows can be healed, piece by piece. And tonight, we raise a glass to the two of you, for proving that sometimes the best partnerships are the ones no one sees coming.”

He lifted his champagne flute high, the room following with a glimmer of glass and gold.

“To Juliette and Damian—may your next chapter be just as daring, just as bold, and just as full of surprises as the one you’ve written so far.”

The room erupted in cheers, flashes popping like tiny fireworks as Juliette and I lifted our glasses in return.

She leaned in, her voice low against my ear. “A secret merger, hmm?”

I turned just enough to catch the smile in her eyes. “Guess the secret’s out now, my dear.”

As the applause faded and the crowd’s attention shifted back to bidding cards and champagne, Juliette’s hand slipped into mine, tugging gently.

“Come on,” she murmured, admiring the ring. “Oh, God, Damian. This ring is gorgeous.”

I let her pull me from the stage, weaving through the crush of guests and well-wishers, murmured congratulations brushing past us like a tide. Somewhere, Gabrielle was blowing us an exaggerated kiss, Anthony giving me a subtle thumbs-up. Lucas and Ella raised their glasses as we passed, the corners of their mouths curved in quiet approval.

We slipped through a side corridor, the noise of the ballroom dimming behind us, until we found ourselves on a small terrace just off the main hall. The night air was cool, the city glittering below in a thousand lights.

Juliette leaned back against the stone railing, exhaling a breath that seemed to carry the weight of the evening with it. “God,” she said with a soft laugh, tipping her head back, “that was insane.”

I stepped in close, resting my hands on either side of her against the cool stone. “You were insane,” I murmured, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “You stole the whole damn night, Jules.”

Her eyes softened, a faint flush still on her skin. “I wanted it to be ours,” she said quietly. “Not just paperwork, not just contracts or whispers. Something real, something unique.”

I smiled, lowering my forehead to hers, feeling the steady pulse of her breath, the warmth of her skin. “It’s always been real, Jules. I just didn’t know how to hold on to it.”

She laughed softly, her fingers curling into the front of my jacket. “Well,” she whispered, “you’re doing perfect, so far.”

I kissed her then, slow, sure, a promise pressed against her mouth. The kind of kiss that says I’m here, I want to spend my life with you, and God, I’m lucky you waited for me to figure that out.

When we pulled apart, her smile tilted into something sly. “I love you, you know,” she said, brushing her thumb over my lip.

Her arms slid around my neck as I pulled her in again, the sound of the gala fading into a distant, happy blur. “I love you, too, Jules.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Juliette

A Few Months Later

I zipped the last suitcase closed and sat back on my heels, breathing in the quiet hum of the house.

Our house.

The thought still caught me off guard sometimes, like I'd accidentally stepped into someone else's life, someone who knew how to move through gleaming marble hallways and sleep beneath chandeliers without blinking. But this wasn't someone else's life. This was mine.

Ours.

The faint sound of Damian's voice floated in from the next room, low and steady as he wrapped up a call. He'd been juggling details all morning—last-minute flight plans, real estate agents, a string of texts from Anthony checking in about the board meeting later this week.

I stood, smoothing the fabric of the simple silk slip dress I'd pulled from the back of my closet. It had been waiting for an occasion I couldn't name until now. I laid it gently across the bed, next to the navy suit Damian had already set out.

Behind me, I heard his footsteps.

"You're sure?" he asked, his voice softer now. Closer.

I turned to find him leaning in the doorway, his tie loose, his sleeves rolled back to his elbows. That small furrow in his brow was still there, the one that only appeared when something mattered more than he wanted to admit.

I smiled. "I'm sure. And I can't wait to meet Mateo."

He pushed off the doorframe, crossing to me in a few slow strides. His hands framed my face, thumbs brushing lightly over my cheekbones. "You're sure you don't want the whole thing? The flowers, the... whatever it is people do?"

I laughed softly, curling my fingers around his wrists. "I don't need the whole thing. I just need you."

The tension in his shoulders loosened at that, a breath escaping between parted lips. “Vegas it is,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “No backing out now. Besides, we don’t want to disappoint Mateo. He has already texted me twice today to check in on us.”

“I was never planning on it. I can’t wait to meet him.”

He pulled back with a grin, his eyes gleaming like they always did before he let his guard down completely. “Then we better not miss our flight.”

I nodded, grabbing my phone and turning toward my purse on the dresser. A text from Gabrielle waited, a string of emojis—champagne bottles, wedding rings, an over-the-top heart-eyed face.

Gabrielle: I LOVE this for you. Send me pics or I’ll disown you.

I snorted, typing back a quick promise with a laughing emoji before glancing at Damian, setting my phone down, and pressing a palm lightly to my stomach. A faint swirl of nausea climbed up my throat—a side effect I’d come to recognize after weeks of hormone shots, pills, and appointments. I breathed through it, counting backwards like the nurse had taught me, until it ebbed into nothing more than a dull queasiness.

Only a few more days until the transfer. Only a few more days until another try.

I wasn’t going to let it ruin today.

“Gabrielle sends her full approval. And threats,” I said.

He chuckled under his breath, reaching for his cufflinks. “Good. We’ll need all the approval we can get.”

I watched him for a moment as he buttoned his sleeves, the steady, unhurried confidence in every move. And beneath it, that same flicker I'd glimpsed the first time he'd told me he wanted more than just the games we'd played.

"You look happy," I said quietly.

He paused, tilting his head toward me. "I am."

A beat passed between us, warm and full.

And for the first time I realized my dreams were coming true. Not because of the mansion, or the jet waiting for us at the private terminal, or even the ring he'd slipped onto my finger at the gala a few months ago. It was him.

Always him.

"Come on," Damian said, offering his hand. "Let's go make this official."

I slid my hand into his, letting his warmth steady me.

"We already are," I murmured.

But still, my heart leapt as he led me toward the door.

Because sometimes 'official' wasn't a formality.

It was a promise.

And this time, I wasn't walking toward it alone.

A few hours later, I sank into the buttery leather seat inside the jet and watched as the city lights fell away beneath us, a glittering trail swallowed by the dark. Damian sat across from me at first, scrolling through something on his phone, but the moment we leveled out, he tucked it away and came to sit beside me.

"Champagne?" he asked, his lips curving in that slow, knowing way that still undid me.

"Of course." I grinned, leaning back as he signaled the attendant.

A chilled bottle appeared in minutes, the cork popping with a soft, satisfying thud. Damian poured two flutes, handing me one before settling into the seat beside mine, our knees brushing.

"To us," he said, raising his glass.

I tipped mine toward his. "To us."

The champagne was cold and bright on my tongue, bubbles rising in soft gold ribbons. I sipped slower than usual, wanting to experience every second of this special moment.

It wasn't lost on me how wild this was. How unlikely.

A few months ago, we'd been circling each other like wary predators, pretending friendship could hold everything we refused to name. And now?

Now we were flying to Las Vegas. To get married.

"I still can't believe we're doing this," I admitted softly, tracing the rim of my glass with one finger. "A year ago, I would've laughed if anyone told me."

Damian chuckled, low and warm beside me. "A year ago, I would've said hell no."

I looked at him, amused. "Oh, really?"

"Marriage?" He shrugged, setting his glass on the table between us. "Didn't think it was in the cards. Didn't think I was built for it."

I turned slightly, pulling one knee up onto the seat. "And now?"

He held my gaze, something gentle threading through his eyes. "Now I know better."

A quiet hum passed between us, deeper than the engines beneath our feet. I leaned closer, resting my head against his shoulder, feeling his breath's steady rise and fall beneath my cheek.

Outside the window, the desert stretched black and endless, sprinkled with distant lights. Somewhere far below, people were walking neon-lit streets, slipping rings onto strangers' fingers in kitschy chapels while Elvis impersonators crooned old love songs.

I smiled faintly at the thought.

"Do you think we'll get an Elvis?" I teased.

Damian snorted. “Not unless you secretly booked one.”

“I didn’t,” I promised, closing my eyes for a moment. “But a drive-thru chapel crossed my mind.”

His arm curled around my shoulders, his lips brushing my temple. “You could marry me in a gas station parking lot, and I’d still think I got lucky.”

I laughed, warmth blooming in my chest. “Well, good news—we’ve at least upgraded from the gas station.”

We sat like that for a while, champagne half-forgotten, the world shrinking to the soft hum of engines and the quiet between us. I didn’t know if it was the altitude or the champagne, but everything felt lighter. Brighter.

I pressed closer, my hand curling lightly around his shirtfront. “This still feels a little crazy,” I murmured.

Damian’s lips curved against my hair. “The best things usually are.”

I let my eyes flutter shut, his warmth steady beneath me, the stars blinking faintly outside the window. As the plane carried us forward, I realized something simple and profound: for once, I wasn’t bracing for the landing. I was ready for wherever we touched down.

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Soon, the limo pulled up to a low, understated building tucked just off the strip, its stone façade softly lit beneath a canopy of string lights. If you didn't know it was a wedding chapel, you might've mistaken it for an art gallery or a boutique hotel. No neon Elvis, no flashing signs. Just quiet elegance humming under the desert sky.

I stepped out first, smoothing the skirt of my cream silk dress, the same one I'd worn to an art gala last fall—simple, clean, something I already loved. Damian came around the car, adjusting his cufflinks, his charcoal suit pressed to perfection despite the long flight.

“Not bad,” I murmured, taking it all in. “Minimalist. You didn't drag me into a Little White Chapel.”

He grinned. “Didn't think you'd forgive me.”

“Good instincts.”

We walked up the chapel steps hand in hand, the hush of evening soft against the air. Inside, the lighting was warm and low, flickering gently against stone walls the color of sun-warmed sand. Pale roses and lavender blooms lined the aisle in slender glass vases. It smelled faintly of candle wax and something older—like stillness, like grace.

It wasn't grand. It wasn't loud.

It was perfect.

A kind-eyed officiant greeted us at the front with a quiet smile, his robe simple, his

presence calming. No music played. The silence wrapped around us like a blessing, cutting out the noise of the Strip just outside.

Damian's fingers tightened around mine as we turned to face each other beneath the soft arch. His eyes met mine with a look that hit me low and deep—certainty, wonder, and just a little fear laced in the kind of love I still couldn't believe was mine.

"You may begin your vows," the officiant said gently.

Damian exhaled a slow, shaky breath. "I didn't believe in lasting love. Not really. I believed in logic. In control. In staying at the edges of everything just far enough not to burn." His thumb traced over my knuckles. "Then you showed up. With your messy grace and your quiet strength, and I didn't stand a chance."

My throat tightened. His voice was rough but steady.

"I spent so long valuing the wrong things. But I'd burn it all down to keep you. I promise to love you without condition, always to be there, to stand still when things get hard. To be a partner, a protector, and a fool for you when you need one. I love you, Juliette. And I'm never going anywhere."

He pulled the ring from his pocket—a delicate band that shimmered like the inside of a shell—and held it between us with quiet reverence.

When it was my turn, I felt the words rush forward before I could even think to stop them.

"I didn't grow up dreaming about weddings. I didn't believe in fairy tales or easy love. But you, Damian, you were the surprise I never saw coming." My voice trembled, but I didn't look away. "You made space for me. You challenged me. And

somewhere in all that fire, I found a home I didn't know I needed. Our home."

He blinked fast.

"I vow to keep choosing you. Even when it's messy. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard. I promise to be brave with you. To believe in what we're building. And to never—ever—let us go quiet when we should speak."

He swallowed hard as I slid the matching band onto his finger. My hand was steady. My heart wasn't.

The officiant's voice softened with warmth. "By the power vested in me by the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife." He smiled. "You may kiss the bride."

Damian cupped my face in his hands, leaning in like the moment was holy, not hurried. His lips met mine—slow, sure, unshakably real—and the world fell away.

Applause echoed softly from the officiant and chapel assistant, but I barely heard it. My pulse was louder. My breath. My joy.

When he finally pulled back, our foreheads touched, our fingers still linked.

"Mrs. Sinclair," he whispered.

I smiled, breath catching. "Sounds good to me."

And God, it did.

We didn't go out on the town after our wedding. We didn't need to. Instead, we found ourselves back in the hotel suite, standing barefoot on the plush carpet while

the neon glow of the Strip spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows like a promise we'd already cashed in.

Damian popped the champagne with a quiet grin, catching the cork before it hit the ceiling. "Here's to us," he murmured, pouring into two sleek flutes.

I kicked off my heels and twirled once in the center of the room, my dress catching the light as I spun. "To us," I echoed, breathless and giddy and a little dizzy in the best way.

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He handed me my glass, his fingers brushing mine—a small touch, but it felt like the sealing of something bigger.

We clinked glasses gently, sipping, standing side by side at the window while the lights of Vegas blinked beneath us.

Damian's arm slid around my waist, pulling me close. "Thank you for saying yes," he said softly, his lips brushing the edge of my temple. "I don't think I ever really believed I'd deserve this. Deserve you."

I turned in his arms, tipping my chin up until our eyes met. "Well, tough luck," I teased lightly, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "You're stuck with me now."

We stood like that for a long moment, wrapped in quiet, the hum of the city pulsing below, the weight of the day settling soft and sure around us.

As I looked out at the glittering lights, I felt his heart steady against mine, and one simple truth rose to the surface, clear as the stars blinking high above the Strip: I'd never needed a wedding. I'd needed a man who made me feel like I didn't have to stand alone anymore.

Damian's voice broke gently into the silence, his fingers curling tighter around my waist. "Think you'll be ready to leave for Malibu tomorrow to meet Mateo?"

I leaned into him, smiling against his chest. "Absolutely."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Damian

We pulled off the winding coastal road and turned through the stone gates of Hopewell Boarding School. The sign was modest, but the campus stretched wide beyond it, framed by the rolling Malibu hills and the hazy blue line of the Pacific in the distance.

I eased the SUV into a visitor parking space near the administration building, cutting the engine. Beside me, Juliette pressed her hand to the window, her gaze drinking in the sun-dappled quad where a few students passed a soccer ball back and forth. In the distance, the faint toll of a chapel bell drifted on the breeze, mingling with the scent of eucalyptus and salt air.

We'd just left the real estate broker's office in Santa Monica—final signatures, wire transfers, a handshake too cheerful for what it meant. Like the board had recommended, one of my California properties was officially sold. The proceeds would go toward salvaging The Cut of Her Jib from bankruptcy. A lifeboat for the brand. And a step toward restoring the confidence I'd lost—both from the board and from myself.

Now, as we sat in the stillness, about to see Mateo for the first time in months, that other weight pressed in—less financial, more personal, I wasn't sure which one was heavier.

"Wow," she murmured, her lips curving faintly. "It's beautiful here. He's lucky."

I followed her gaze, my stomach tightening in that familiar knot. "Yeah," I said quietly. "He is."

Juliette turned toward me, her eyes warm but searching. “Are you nervous?”

A small, rueful smile tugged at my mouth. “A little. Haven’t seen him since winter break. He’s growing so fast—every time it’s like meeting a new version of him.”

She leaned back in her seat, thoughtful. “Me too. Nervous, I mean.” Her hand brushed lightly through her hair. “This feels... big.”

“It is,” I said, reaching across the console to squeeze her knee. “But you’ll be great with him.”

She covered my hand with hers, squeezing it back before letting go, her gaze drifting again toward the quad. “I hope he likes me.”

“He will,” I promised, though deep down I knew it wasn’t really about liking. It was about fitting. About bridging two halves of a life I’d been too afraid to merge before now.

I climbed out, circled around to open her door, watching as she slid out, her hair catching the sunlight in soft waves. She tipped her head back, closing her eyes for a second as the breeze kissed her face.

God, she looked like she belonged here already—like she belonged everywhere I wanted to go.

The sound of kids laughing filtered across the lawn, and I watched a group of boys dart across the grass, a soccer ball arcing between them, Mateo not among them but easy to imagine somewhere in the mix.

Juliette touched my elbow, her voice gentle. “Ready?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah. Let’s check in.”

We walked toward the admin building, the sun warm on our backs, footsteps muffled by the neatly manicured paths. Inside, the office was cool and tidy, wood-paneled walls lined with framed photos of graduating classes and plaques of academic honors. Behind the front desk, a cheerful receptionist smiled over half-moon glasses.

“Mr. Sinclair,” she greeted warmly. “Welcome back.”

I nodded, returning the smile. “Good to be here.”

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“We’ve got everything ready for you—just head on back, and Mr. Reyes in accounting will help you take care of Mateo’s financial needs.”

“Thanks,” I said, glancing back at Juliette as we followed the hallway deeper into the building.

She paused at a display case filled with student artwork, tracing a finger along the glass. “These are incredible,” she murmured, her voice laced with admiration.

I watched her for a second—how naturally she gravitated toward beauty, how easily she found something to appreciate wherever she went. “I’ll be quick,” I promised.

“Take your time,” she said, her smile soft, supportive.

Inside the accounts office, I handled the logistics—final tuition payment, a quiet bump to Mateo’s expense account for end-of-year needs, nodding politely through small talk with Mr. Reyes while my mind stayed half-anchored in the hallway where Juliette waited.

When I emerged, she was sitting on a bench beneath a large oil painting of the school’s original founders, her phone in hand, thumbs scrolling idly. She looked up as I approached, sliding her phone away.

“All set?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I hesitated, the weight of what was ahead pressing against my ribcage. “Want to sit for a minute?”

She patted the spot beside her. “Talk to me.”

I dropped down beside her, elbows braced on my knees, staring at the tile floor for a long moment before I found the words.

“I was nineteen,” I said quietly. “Freshman year at Miami University. My roommate convinced me to go with him to the fertility clinic to donate. He needed the money. I went for moral support.”

Juliette’s brows lifted, but she stayed silent, waiting.

“They offered me a payment too. I figured—why not? I wasn’t thinking long-term. Hell, I wasn’t thinking at all.” I scrubbed a hand through my hair. “Didn’t know if they even used it.”

Her hand brushed against my arm, anchoring.

“Six years later, Valencia was handling some of my real estate deals—he’d been my business attorney for a while, long before he ever became a judge. One afternoon, after closing a deal, he pulled me aside. Told me about Mateo’s mother. How she’d passed unexpectedly. How he’d been helping sort out the estate and custody. And that while reviewing some sealed clinic records, my name had come up.”

Juliette’s fingers slid down to thread with mine.

“I wasn’t prepared,” I admitted. “Didn’t know how to be a father. I’d barely survived being a son.” A bitter laugh escaped. “I spent years just... funding him. Tuition, nannies, summer camps. Every time I tried to get closer, something in me froze.”

“You’re here now,” she said softly.

“Come on,” I said, standing and offering her my hand. “Let’s go meet him.”

She rose, sliding her fingers into mine.

The courtyard stretched wide before us, framed by tall palms and neat rows of brick pathways leading toward the playground at the far end. A breeze carried the faint tang of the ocean, ruffling the edges of Juliette’s hair as she stood beside me, shading her eyes with her hand.

“Where is he?” she asked softly, scanning the crowd.

I swallowed, my gaze sweeping across the lawn. There were groups of kids everywhere—playing soccer, sprawled under trees with books, two boys tossing a frisbee back and forth. But I’d recognize that quick, determined stride anywhere.

“There.”

A flash of movement between the benches. A backpack bouncing. Sneakers pounding over the pavement.

Mateo.

His grin widened the second he spotted me. “Dad!”

The word hit like a lightning bolt.

For a second, I froze—half stunned, half overwhelmed. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard it... but it was the first time he’d shouted it like it wasn’t a secret. Like it wasn’t something to be tucked quietly between paperwork and polite titles.

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I crouched just in time to catch him as he barreled into me, arms flung tight around my neck, the force of him nearly knocking me backward.

“Hey, buddy.” My voice came out rougher than I meant, choked around the sudden swell in my chest. I held him tight, breathing in the faint scent of shampoo and sunshine and cafeteria pizza. “God, you’ve grown.”

Mateo pulled back, beaming. “I’m almost taller than you.”

I laughed, ruffling his hair. “Not yet, but you’re getting there.”

He turned toward Juliette then, curiosity bright in his dark eyes. “Is this her?”

Juliette offered her hand with an easy smile. “I’m Juliette. It’s really great to meet you, Mateo.”

He shook her hand solemnly, then grinned again. “Dad talks about you.”

“Does he now?” Juliette shot me a playful glance before turning back to Mateo. “All good things, I hope.”

Mateo nodded emphatically. “He said you’re smart. And that you’re bossy.”

Juliette laughed, delighted. “He’s not wrong.”

They started talking then—about art, his favorite project from his history class, a mural he’d helped paint for Earth Day. I watched them, struck dumb by how easy it

was, how Juliette met him exactly where he was, without fumbling or awkwardness. Just warmth, curiosity, and that quiet confidence she carried like armor.

For a moment, I didn't say a word. I stood there, hands braced on my knees, watching the two volley back and forth like they'd known each other longer than the five minutes it had been.

And something inside me shifted.

I'd always worried this part of my life—the complicated part, the part wrapped in secrets and contracts and unexpected fatherhood—wouldn't have room for anyone else. That no woman would willingly step into it, let alone belong there.

Yet while watching Juliette beside my son, listening to them trade questions, stories, and dreams... It didn't feel like I was forcing two worlds together. It felt like she'd been meant to stand here all along.

Mateo grabbed Juliette's hand, tugging her toward the playground. "Come see the mural! I painted a dragon!"

Juliette shot me a look over her shoulder, a sparkle in her eye. "Don't worry, we'll be right back."

I stood still, my heart still hammering, the echo of Dad still vibrating in my bones.

And as I watched Juliette and Mateo walk ahead—her laughing at something he said, him practically bouncing at her side—I realized:

This wasn't the life I'd inherited.

This was the life I'd chosen.

Soon, we were sitting outside on the terrace of a casual café built into the cliff's edge, the kind of place with weathered wood tables, string lights overhead, and a view that made conversation feel secondary. The ocean crashed gently below, steady and blue, like the rhythm of a life I hadn't realized I'd been craving.

Mateo slurped down his second root beer and leaned across the table with a sly grin. "So... did you kiss at the wedding?"

Juliette laughed, nearly choking on her water. "We did."

"Was it gross?"

"It was very dignified," I said dryly.

"Romantic," Juliette corrected with a smirk. "Turns out your dad is a closet romantic."

Mateo raised his brows, stunned. "Seriously?"

"She's exaggerating," I muttered.

"Am I?"

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I shook my head, and Mateo grinned between us like he was watching a sitcom unfold live.

“You gonna have kids?” he asked next, mouth full of fries.

Juliette’s hand found mine under the table. She didn’t flinch, didn’t gloss it over. “We’re trying.”

Mateo sat back, eyebrows high. “Really?”

“Really.”

A huge grin broke across his face. “That’s so cool. I always wanted a brother. Or a sister. But I’d prefer a brother. You know. For balance.”

Juliette chuckled. “We’ll pass along your request.”

He bounced in his chair a little. “Can I help name them?”

“We’ll see,” I said, my voice catching just slightly.

God. The way he said it—casual, hopeful, like this was the most natural thing in the world. Like we were a family and not three people stumbling their way toward something bigger than all of us. My throat tightened as I watched him swipe the last fry off his plate and stuff it into his mouth, like it was just another day.

But it wasn’t. It was everything.

After lunch, we walked the stretch of the beach down to the pier, the three of us side-by-side. The surf competition had already started—students lined up with boards, spectators on benches, a small tent handing out shaved ice and branded towels.

Mateo quickly introduced Juliette to half a dozen friends, proud as hell to have us there. She leaned into every conversation like she'd known them for years, asking about their board brands and cheering when one of them caught a wave clean. I stood behind them both, arms crossed, a smile tugging at my mouth.

I didn't say much.

I didn't need to.

Because the sight of Juliette, hands cupped around her mouth as she shouted for a kid named "Westley" to hold his line, was something I wouldn't forget.

This—this messy, sun-soaked chaos felt more like a life than anything I'd built on paper.

A few hours later, the sun started to dip low behind the campus trees, casting long shadows across the courtyard as we returned to the gates. Mateo walked between us, stuffing his hands inside his pockets like he didn't want the moment to end.

He turned to Juliette at the gates and threw his arms around her waist. "Promise you'll come back?"

She kissed his cheek. "Count on it."

Then he turned to me, wrapping his arms around my neck. "Thanks, Dad."

Just two words. But they broke me wide open.

We watched him disappear past the security gate, jogging up the steps toward the dorm entrance. He turned one last time to wave. I raised my hand in return, heart lodged somewhere between my chest and my throat.

As we climbed into the SUV, Juliette reached over and threaded her fingers through mine.

“You’re a good dad, Damian, and I love you.”

“I love you, too, Jules.” I brought our joined hands to my lips and kissed her knuckles.

The campus disappeared behind us, the road unwinding in long, quiet stretches between trees and low hills. The horizon was still flushed with the last remnants of sun, gold streaking through violet.

As I drove, I didn’t think about business plans, gala speeches, or whether the board would ever see me the way I wanted to be seen.

Because I wasn’t my father’s son anymore, I was Mateo’s dad and Juliette’s husband.

I was finally the man I wanted to be.

EPILOGUE

Juliette

One Year Later

The scent of grilled vegetables and citrus-marinated shrimp drifted through the backyard, carried by the soft breeze off the bay. Palm trees rustled overhead, dappling the yard with shifting light as afternoon melted into golden evening.

Damian stood at the grill, tongs in one hand, drink in the other, wearing the kind of relaxed smile that still made something flutter deep in my chest. Nearby, Mateo was helping Anthony rig the canopy over the picnic table, his sleeves rolled up with the sun streaking his dark hair. He looked taller every time I blinked.

Behind me, Gabrielle sat cross-legged on a blanket with Julian and Vivienne—her baby daughter curled against her chest, and Julian happily arranging toy boats in a blow-up wading pool.

I shifted Isla, my daughter, higher on my hip and kissed the top of her soft, dark curls. She squealed in response, reaching for the necklace around my neck and grabbing it with surprisingly fierce fingers. “Careful,” I whispered with a grin, “that’s a limited edition.”

Gabrielle looked up from the blanket. “She’s going to be a collector, obviously.”

“Or a pirate,” I shot back.

She laughed, adjusting Vivienne. “I’d take either.”

From the side yard came the clank of the fence gate and Damian’s low whistle. “Mateo, can you give me a hand?”

Mateo’s eyes lit up. “Sure!” He jogged off, leaving Anthony with the canopy half-assembled.

I moved to the edge of the patio, shielding my eyes from the sun. When Mateo rounded the corner and saw the jet ski, he froze.

“What—” His voice cracked. “Is that...?”

Damian tossed him the keys. “Only if you think straight and keep your grade average at school, it’s earned you a little freedom on the water.”

Mateo stared for a second longer, then launched forward and hugged Damian so hard the keys nearly fell from his hands. “This is insane!”

Julian cheered and pointed from the pool. “Jet ski!”

Gabrielle laughed. “Oh, good. One more motorized vehicle for our peace of mind.”

They wheeled it down to the water while the rest of us gathered at the edge of the dock. Mateo’s grin split his face as he climbed on and fired it up. He looped out into the bay, carving easy arcs in the water, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak.

Damian slid his arm around my waist, kissing my temple. “Worth it?”

I nodded, too full to say anything yet. This—this was what we had built. Not just a house. A life.

Gabrielle called from the table, “Food’s ready!”

“Come on. Let’s eat,” Damian announced as he waved for Mateo to come back to the dock.

Soon, we walked back toward the picnic table, Isla babbling against my shoulder. I took in the plates of food, the mismatched chairs filled with people I loved. This wasn’t the life I’d expected.

It was better.

“Hey, Mom,” Mateo said, his voice a little shy. “Can I give you something?”

I smiled, shifting Isla carefully to my shoulder. “Of course.”

He held out a thin, wrapped parcel made of brown kraft paper and blue twine. I took it gently, sensing Gabrielle’s eyes on me too now, her smile tugging wider. Mateo rocked on his heels while I untied the string.

Inside was a photograph. Framed. Black and white.

It was a photo I didn’t even know existed—me in the hospital bed, cradling Isla in my arms, her tiny pink cap slightly askew. Damian sat beside me, one arm around my shoulders, the other hand gently resting on Isla’s impossibly small back. Mateo sat on the other side of me, grinning so wide his eyes nearly disappeared, one hand awkwardly but protectively cupping Isla’s foot like he already knew how to be a big brother. My hair was a mess, my eyes still puffy from tears of joy, but I was glowing. We all were. The kind of glow that only comes when something real and rare settles into your life and makes a home there.

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“I found it on Dad’s phone. I think the nurse took it for us,” Mateo said softly, rubbing the back of his neck. “It was just kind of... sitting there. I liked it. So I asked Aunt Gabrielle to help me get it printed.”

I couldn’t speak for a second. My throat just closed right up.

Damian stepped behind me, a palm resting lightly on my shoulder as he looked down at the photo. “I’ll never forget that beautiful day,” he murmured, voice roughened by the memory.

I laughed through the joyful ache in my chest.

Mateo flushed with pride. “I just thought it should be in the house. You know... where everyone can see it.”

I reached out, tugged him into a quick, one-armed hug. “It will be. Right by the entry. Thank you, honey. It’s perfect.”

The sun was starting to drop behind the horizon now, slanting copper and rose gold across the water. Anthony handed Gabrielle a glass of sparkling water with a lime wedge tucked in the rim. Isla stirred and settled again against my chest.

For a moment, I just looked around.

At Mateo, sprawled in a patio chair, grinning like he hadn’t a care in the world.

At Damian, quietly watching me with that slow-burning affection I’d come to

recognize like a second heartbeat.

At my sister, her baby dozing in her lap, her husband's arm resting across the back of her chair.

This life... it had once seemed impossible. And now?

Now it was just mine.

I leaned into Damian, resting my temple against his shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Because I had everything I never thought I could want.

A daughter who smelled like baby powder and dreams.

A surprise son who called my husband Dad, and looked at him like Damian was his hero.

A twin sister who had once held me together through heartbreak and now walked beside me through joy.

And a man who made good on every promise he never said out loud.

I looked again at the photo in my lap, the dock, the way the light had bent around us like a blessing, and I smiled.

Love wasn't perfect. It wasn't tidy.

But tonight, as the sun sank low and the stars began to blink awake across the sky, I felt whole.

Not alone.

Home.

More than a happy ending.

It was just the beginning.