



She's a Big Deal

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Description: SHE HAS MADE HERSELF UNTOUCHABLE

Miami architect and all-round business genius, Grace Michaels, has only one goal in life: professional excellence. Often described as arrogant, ruthless, and a demanding bitch, Grace could not care less. Following a personal tragedy many years ago, she hardened her heart and spirit. Trust, intimacy, and a romantic relationship, are not on her agenda.

When family issues call her temporarily back to her native Vermont, Grace meets Olivia Bianchi: a kind-hearted artist, vegan, and rescuer of puppies. Olivia is absolutely not her type. Too young, too sweet, and entirely too butch. As for her, Olivia figures that hugging a cactus might be less painful than getting close to the ever aloof Grace Michaels.

Against all odds, attraction strikes.

Could Grace have met her match? Will Olivia be the one to finally touch her?

A lesbian romance about healing and giving love a second chance

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chapter 1

Miami – Florida

Grace Michaels settled at her desk for an afternoon of creative work. On the other side of the thick glass walls of her splendid corner office, thunder rumbled over the streets of Miami. Inky black clouds simmered overhead, giving Grace the perfect vibe for the mood she wanted to achieve with her work today. Julia Raw (her real name), the hot Hollywood producer tipped to win big at the Oscars this year, had just acquired the old Pulse nightclub in town and given Grace carte blanche to re-design the interior. From top to bottom, all 10,000 square feet of space were hers to play with.

“Make it luxurious and classy,” Raw told her. “I want bold. Unique. I’ve seen some of your work, Ms. Michaels. I know what you can do. Amaze me.”

Grace excelled at amazing clients, even more so when they gave her free rein of expression. In the last couple of years, with a few key iconic creations, she had established herself as one of the country’s top three most sought-after architects and interior designers. Being who she was, she would not be fully satisfied until she reached the top spot, of course... But it was a good start. Her company, Brazen Inc., held offices in New York, Miami, and LA. She had firm plans to conquer Paris next. London, and therest of Europe. Business was booming. She put on her ANC headphones and selected a jazzy, moody playlist to stimulate the mind. With a few quick taps on her keyboard, she activated the holographic design software she used to perfect her projects. This, too, had cemented her reputation as a remarkable player in the field. When it occurred to Grace that current design tools were not good enough

for her expansive imagination, she put her software engineering skills to good use and created her own. Why not? All it took was a bit of clever coding, which she had taught herself as a hobby, a dash of AI, and voila! She had made herself a perfect weapon. On her desk was the latest copy of Time Magazine. She was on the cover, with a judicious title: Not just a pretty face. This was nicely tongue-in-cheek and had made her smirk when she saw it. You betcha. Smart, resourceful, and ruthless were the three words most often used to describe her in the press. And yes, she also did consider the last adjective a compliment. She rose from her desk after firing up the program. Thanks to the advanced software, Grace could walk inside the holographic representation she had created of her new canvas. And play.

“Marble floors,” she mused, causing the program to make them appear under her feet. “Hmm. Add layers of shimmering lights, like underwater reflections. Think Santorini party on a hot summer’s night. That kind of vibe.”

She shook her head as the program gave her exactly what she’d asked for.

“Actually, scrap this.” Yeah, it was too much. “Return to a blank canvas.”

Now then, what to do with this? Julia Raw wanted bold and unique—tall order in a city like Miami, where this tended to be the norm. It was a worthy, exciting challenge. Grace almost purred as the perfect idea began to emerge in her mind’s eye.

“Give me thick rubber flooring,” she ordered. “Yellow lines on the floor. Think hard and edgy. Space? Spaceship. Yes.” She let her mind riff on the concept. “Space station, Blade Runner vibe. Hmm. Maybe.”

A ray of unwanted light pierced through the holographic scene, breaking the mood and shattering her concentration.

“Save and exit,” Grace instructed. “Program off.” She removed her headphones and

turned to face her PA, who stood at the door, looking apologetic. “Yes?”

Grace did not even try to sound warm. Her staff knew not to disturb her when she was in creative mode. She had fired one recently for failing to comply with the directive twice with no valid reason. So this had better be good.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Ms. Michaels.” The woman winced, clearly aware of the stakes. “But there is an urgent call for you I think you should take.”

“Who is it?” Grace demanded.

“Zachary Wills from the Excelsior.”

It was a good call, actually. Grace would fire anyone who did not alert her that the CEO of the Excelsior chain of hotels wanted to speak to her.

“I’ll take it,” she nodded. “Thank you, Libby.”

“Yes, Ms. Michaels.” The assistant flashed a relieved smile. “I’ll put him through.”

Grace stood in front of her panoramic wall, staring at some spectacular lightning going off in the distance as Zachary Wills’s gravelly voice sounded on the speaker.

“Hello, Grace.”

“Zachary. What can I do for you?”

“Ah, yes. Well...” He sighed, prompting her to turn around with an irritated frown. The man was usually as straight as an arrow, always quick and to the point. Being allergic to bullshit and inane chit-chat herself, it was something Grace appreciated a lot about him. Now, his uncharacteristic hesitation hinted at some bad news.

“What’s the matter?” she prompted.

“Look, Grace, we just received an attractive counter-offer to yours,” he admitted. “I must admit it’s one to consider.”

The Excelsior group had recently issued an open invitation to the best designers in the land to submit their proposals for the renovation and revamp of all forty of their US hotels. It was a juicy contract and would be awesome for reputation as well. ‘Ours for the taking’, Grace had announced to her team. And so, this bid had entirely consumed the past eight weeks of her life. She was no stranger to hard work and being All-In for the win. When adding natural talent and skills to the mix, it was no wonder the Brazen Inc. offer had come off as the winner. Only the day before, Wills and his board of directors had agreed on a deal in principle. So convinced was Grace that no one could better what her company had to offer in terms of financials, originality, and quality of the work, that her first reaction to the news now was to chuckle.

“Oh yeah?” No way!

But Wills’s voice held no trace of amusement.

“Quite so,” he let her know. “They’ve quoted us cheaper on the work, with faster turnarounds, and the designs are similar to yours. So...”

“What?” Grace barely avoided choking on the words similar. She’d built her company from the ground up. Made a name for herself on the strength of being different, always one step ahead of predictable trends. Plus, she was super cost-efficient and one of the fastest turnarounds in the business. What Zachary was saying to her was ridiculous. “Who is it?” she growled. “Who quoted you such nonsense?”

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“Expansive Designs Ltd.”

“Never heard that name before. Who are they?”

“It’s a new start-up company.”

“No kidding. Who’s the boss?”

“Her name is Kathryn Charles.”

“Never heard of her either. I’ll come over now and talk it through with you, Zac.”

“Now’s not a good time, Grace. I’ll call you when—”

“Why?” Grace snarled. “Is she there? Are you in the middle of looking at that proposal now?”

“Yes, but—”

“Thanks for calling. I’m on my way.”

“Grace. No. Wait a min—”

She cut him off and strode out across the main office. For God’s sake!

“Libby!” she barked.

“Yes, Ms. Michaels?”

“Get online and dig up everything there is to find about a company called Expansive Designs Ltd. Research their CEO, one Kathryn Charles, and send all that to my phone ASAP. I’m off to Excelsior HQ.”

“On it, Ms. Michaels.”

Grace walked out of her office on wings of fury, causing a few of her designers to stare in wonder as she stormed past their stations. She barely noticed any of the looks, fuming as she was. A better offer than ours? Like hell! She had won this deal fair and square. If anyone thought they could come in at the last second and steal it from her... They were going to discover otherwise.

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At least, the drive over was satisfying. Grace could have easily afforded ten limos and the same number of private chauffeurs if she had wanted it. But she chose to drive herself and favored a Ferrari 812 GTS convertible for the job. Blood-red in color, with a V12 engine, the car delivered on performance and elegance in equal parts, matching her personal style. She pushed the engine and literally flew on her way to the other side of Miami CBD. She just kept a wary eye out for traffic cops on the prowl since she did not want to add to the wad of speeding tickets already stuffed inside her glove box... But the supercharged drive gave her pleasure, as always, and also put her in the right frame of mind for what may be to come. Libby had come through with the requested information, which turned out to be very little. Expansive Designs Ltd, and their CEO, Kathryn Charles, were a complete mystery. The company had sprung out of nowhere six months ago. Yet, even in such a short amount of time, they’d acquired an impressive client portfolio. Something felt fishy with that business, and Grace raced into town prepared to do battle. Fifteen minutes later, she came to a steaming stop in front of a bemused parking attendant.

“Here.” She tossed him the keys, noted his grin spreading wide as he took in the proud and aggressive lines of the Ferrari, and issued a clear warning. “Put a single scratch on her, and I will have your job.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Proud, aggressive... Similar words could be used to describe Grace as she strode purposefully across the marble lobby. Once upon a time, she had traveled the world as a professional dancer. When a recurring injury ended that career, she could have gone into teaching but opted for architecture, design, and the business world instead. Though it proved a judicious choice, she still loved to dance in her spare time and maintained a rigorous training routine. Even approaching fifty, she had lost none of her carriage and fluidity. As she breezed past the front desk, the receptionist on duty would have seen a tall, slender woman with blond hair in a short stylish bob, dressed in a black pantsuit and expensive designer heels. Headed toward the elevators without a second glance, as if she owned the place and everyone in it.

“Uh... Ma’am... May I help you?”

“No thanks.”

The woman must be new, to call her ‘Ma’am’. Grace barely flicked her a disinterested glance as she punched the elevator button. And waited. Nothing happened.

“I have to activate it,” the receptionist informed her coolly. “I’ll be glad to do so if you tell me who you are here to see. Also, you have to sign in.”

The fact that she was enjoying this measure of power over her was not lost on Grace, who suppressed a scowl to not give her more satisfaction. Little people and their tiny pleasures, she figured. Well, then. She would enjoy toying with this one.

“I’m here to see Zac Wills.”

“I’m afraid Mr. Wills is in a meeting and can’t be disturbed at the moment.”

No kidding?“He’ll see me,” Grace assured.

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“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“Well, then—”

“Look, Greta,” Grace read her name on the tag hanging off the front of her pale yellow blouse. Not a very clever choice to go with her red-haired skin, but Grace was not there to dispense style advice. “Zac is expecting me. Now do yourself a favor and don’t delay me any further.”

“And your name is, ma’am?” Greta inquired with practiced condescension.

“Grace Michaels; Brazen Inc.”

“Oh...” Contempt slid off the woman’s face to be replaced by a kind of awe.

Grace could not resist a cocky line. “Heard of me, have you?”

“Yes. Yes, Ms. Michaels. But Mr. Wills really cannot—”

Grace turned around and clicked her fingers on her way to the elevator. The receptionist must have reached the conclusion that she would rather deal with a reprimand later than a pissed-off Grace Michaels in person. Wise choice, indeed. Grace treated her to a sly smile before the private elevator doors closed.

“Thank you, Greta.” What a good girl, she almost purred.

Oh, she was pumped! Whoever thought they could resort to dirty tricks to steal what she had worked so hard for was in for a rude awakening. Wills's private secretary greeted her on the top floor with a friendly, if slightly alarmed, smile.

"Ms. Michaels. We weren't expecting you..."

"Yeah, I know." Grace pointed with a long-nailed finger, painted blood-red like the Ferrari. "Conference room this way, right?"

"Yes... But—Ms Michaels, if you could just wait a minute, please..."

"Sorry, no."

chapter 2

Grace powered down the corridor, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the unimaginative surroundings. Muted colors, gray carpets, anemic plants languishing in corners on mismatched furniture... Generic world, she decided. Desperately corporate, uninspired, and deflated. No wonder Wills had been so enthusiastic about her designs and ideas for renovation if he was forced to come to work every day in this dreary place. And their hotels were the same, Grace knew. She would inject a much-needed breath of fresh air to the Excelsior brand, add vibrancy and flair to their hotels, and upgrade their outdated way of thinking at the same time. Business would be flowing again in no time.

"Ah, here it is, yes."

"Ms. Michaels, if you would just let me announce you..."

Ignoring the secretary's request as she trotted behind her to match her longer strides, Grace pulled open the double doors of the conference room and let her body language

announce her arrival. When she stepped through, she did so with just the right mix of calculated restraint and fiery energy. Nobody would fail to realize that she was here to take command.

“Hello, gentlemen.” She flashed a hard smile, hands on hips, as all eyes turned to her.

“Grace.” An irritated-looking Zac Wills stepped forward to greet her with a firm handshake. “Please, join us.”

“Yes, I believe I will.”

His accountant and three of the directors from the Excelsior board delivered looks as bland as their matching three-piece suits. Grace groaned inwardly. Yes, it was fitting. They all pretty much matched the décor. She turned to face the only other woman in the room, who certainly did not favor bland. She was dressed in a violent-blue pencil skirt and crisp white shirt over a set of ample breasts, which she obviously took care to highlight. Okay, then. Now it all made a lot more sense.

“Well, well,” Grace stated with an amused sneer. “Kathryn Charles, I presume? Or should I call you Katya Barnett? Which is it, darling?”

If looks could kill, Grace would be reduced to mere bones from the way the woman, who turned aggressively to face Wills, first stared.

“What are you doing?” she barked. “This was supposed to be a private negotiation.”

Before he could reply, Grace let out a darkly ironic chuckle. “Yes, I’m sure you wanted it to be. Sorry, babe, but it looks like you’ve lost your chance.”

Wills’s patience seemed to be growing thin as he glanced from one woman to the other. Grace could empathize.

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“Okay, what’s going on here?” he demanded.

Since no one offered her a chair, Grace pulled one out for herself, sat down, and crossed her legs. She flashed an inviting smile at her opponent, in sharp contrast with the lethal look in her eyes.

“Good question, Zac,” she approved. “I think we should all sit down, and let my former head of marketing explain.”

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“Taking into account various levels of stupidity, there is foolish, dumb, irresponsible. Then you’ve got the likes of Katya Barnett,” Grace later told her lawyer over the phone. “She’s all that and a few more. Yes, yes, we are definitely suing.”

During the meeting at Excelsior, she had easily dismantled every single argument her competitor came up with in her own defense. Grace explained to Wills and his people that the woman used to work under her. Deliberately using the word ‘under’ instead of ‘for’. And that she’d fired her for poor performance, and an even worse pissy attitude. In light of this information, the similarities in her designs and ideas could no longer only be attributed to a strange coincidence. It all pointed to the obvious and more serious issue: material theft.

“Of course, she denied it all when I confronted her,” Grace stated with a derisive snort. “Claimed that Charles is her maiden name, and Kathryn just a swankier version of her first name. She said her company is legit. She refused to back down, and swore blind that she had not stolen anything from me.”

“Did Wills believe her?”

“Not after I told him the full story, no. We won that contract fair and square.”

“Has he confirmed this yet?”

“Hundred percent.” Grace smiled in satisfaction as she eyed the final paperwork on her desk. “Before I left his office today, I got the man and his lawyer to sign on the dotted line.”

“Ah, well done.”

“Yes, indeed. So now, I want you to sue Kat Barnett and her company into the ground. I want her incinerated.”

“Consider it smoking, Ms. Michaels.”

“Excellent. Keep me posted.”

Grace went back to stand in front of her panoramic wall as she hung up. The storm had passed, and her creative mood had evaporated with it. This little interlude had cost her... But hey, never mind. The Excelsior deal was hers now, officially, and that was the most important thing.

“Ms. Michaels?” Her assistant poked her head back in. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure.” Grace waved her in.

Libby Jackson was a petite woman on the plump side, with a thick mass of glossy black hair currently arranged in an artful bun on top of her head and intelligent blue eyes. She owned her size and was always splendidly dressed. Today, this meant flare-

out black linen trousers with a large silver belt and a fuchsia silk shirt with the top three buttons open. Stylish. On point. Grace reflected that the Excelsior receptionist would probably benefit greatly from spending a bit of time with a woman like her. She watched Libby set a flower on her desk in a multi-colored stained glass vase.

“What is this?”

“It’s a wild orchid, Ms. Michaels.”

“Yes, I can see that.” And a beautiful one too. Three stems, with the center of each delicate white bloom dappled in deep purple. Grace had a weakness for orchids, and this one definitely was a winner. “Who sent it?”

“No one,” Libby revealed with a bit of a shy glance at her. “This is from me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Happy birthday, Ms. Michaels.”

Grace blinked. Oh, gosh. “It is my birthday, huh?”

“Yes, indeed,” Libby grinned.

“I totally forgot it was today.”

“I thought it might skip your mind, yes. I know how busy you’ve been with securing this new deal. Congratulations, by the way.”

Of course, being busy was not specifically related to this one deal. If not Excelsior, it would have been another challenge. Grace did not just drive the members of her team hard; she also led by example and was even more ferocious and uncompromising

with her own self. Work served another purpose too. The more time she spent focused on business, the less opportunity she had to reflect on the things she missed.

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“Thanks, Libby,” she nodded. “This orchid is gorgeous.”

The woman beamed in pleasure. “I am glad you like it. Can I do anything else for you today, Ms. Michaels?”

“Hmm...” Grace glanced at her watch. Could it be six P.M. already? Time sure did fly when you were busy annihilating the competition. “No, it’s okay. You can go if you like. Have a good weekend.”

“You too, Ms. Michaels.”

“And Libby?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for your support during this latest campaign. You were a valuable part of the winning team. I love your outfit today, by the way.”

“Oh, thank you!” Libby flashed a brilliant, if slightly dazed, smile at such an unexpected compliment from her usually tight-lipped boss.

She hesitated and did look for a moment as if she may even attempt to deliver a hug. Luckily, she decided against it. It was well known among her staff that Grace Michaels did not engage in softie-softie interactions. Or waste time celebrating birthdays, for that matter. She was aware of the things people called her when she was out of earshot. A creative genius, for sure. But also cold, intimidating, and aloof, most of the time. Some referred to her as an arrogant, unforgiving, demanding bitch.

Grace was not worried about any of it. She supposed that a woman like her, with serious skills, ambition, and a winning attitude, ran the risk of being called a lot of hurtful things. Sometimes especially by less talented, jealous women in her field. Grace had no time for petty jealousies and reflected with amusement that it must be the reason why it was her face on the cover of Time and not theirs. Anyway, bless the lovely Libby for daring to challenge the status quo with her thoughtful gift. As she watched the door close behind her assistant, Grace recalled a time when she actually loved birthdays. And Christmas, too, which was only weeks away now. She employed someone to buy seasonal gifts for the staff closest to her, but she might make an exception this year, and take care of Libby's personally. Smiling at the idea, she picked up her phone to set a reminder. And almost dropped it. Oh... The sudden tightening in her chest made her gasp. It was immediately painful, and her heart began to race. No, no... God-dammit! As her legs trembled, Grace dropped into her chair and gripped the armrests tightly. Just breathe. Clear your mind and breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut, focused on catching her breath, first of all, and then on taking deep ones. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of her face as she fought to recover. She did manage it eventually, not quick enough for her liking, but it happened. Gradually, her body settled. Like a river out of control, the roaring in her head receded too. It was not long before her anger flared.

“For fuck's sake!”

She tried to recall the last time a similar rush of anxiety had caught her unaware. It was at least a full year... So why now? Just because she took pleasure in thinking of buying someone a gift for Christmas? She hated to think she was still not over this stuff. Such a loss of control was unacceptable. Grace swallowed two paracetamol tablets from the emergency stash that she kept in her drawer since even a short episode like this could trigger a debilitating headache later on. Then she did what she did best: ignore the issue, especially thinking about its root cause, and concentrate on some work instead. Twenty minutes later, irritated at her inability to do so, she gave it up. Okay, now what? Dealing with too much energy in her system, probably. She was

still pretty revved from the confrontation with Barnett. Also, it was Friday evening on her forty-ninth birthday. She had just won the business deal of the year. Yet, here she was, alone in her office and still hustling. Or trying to, and not faring very well. How ridiculous. Maybe she did deserve a treat, after all?

“Bet your ass I do,” she muttered.

She could have gone to the gym to blow off steam, but it would feel like a chore. No, she had something better in mind for tonight. Switching screens, Grace opened a new window and typed in: www.redencounters.com. Her pulse quickened, in a good way this time, as she entered her login details and watched a familiar greeting flash on the screen: Welcome back, Sky Dancer. No one used their real name when shopping for an escort online, of course, and Grace’s user name was a nod to her former life. She scrolled down the list of profiles until she reached the one she was after. The chance of Magalie being available on such short notice was one in a million, but this seemed to be Grace’s lucky night. She hit the booking button and made her selection from the drop-down menu which appeared.

Platinum package – All night. \$2,000. Magalie, also not her real name, was one of the few escorts who could entertain her equally well on the dance floor and in bed. Without hesitation, Grace clicked Confirm.

chapter 3

Red Falls – Vermont

As Olivia Bianchi crawled into a dark, icy tunnel, the last thing on her mind was a night of sultry dancing and forbidden sex with a high-class escort girl. Dana Matthews, the local vet and her partner in crime at the animal shelter, flashed her own light from the other end.

“You see anything?”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“Spiders with a grudge,” Olivia replied.

“Watch yourself.”

When it came to most other things, Dana was fearless. However, as small spaces were her kryptonite, when dark narrow tunnels were involved, namely some kind of old drainage pipe, Olivia got the job. She would not mind that at all, nor the spiders, if only she could locate the dog they had been told was here. Ah... Just as the thought occurred to her, she finally caught two small eyes in the beam of her flashlight.

“Got him,” she advised. “Oh, gosh, he’s only tiny!”

“Is it a puppy?”

“Yeah.” Olivia angled her torch away slightly in order not to blind him. “Tiny trembling pup.” She crawled closer. “Hey there, little guy. Hey... It’s okay.”

The puppy watched her approach with terror in his eyes, and Olivia noticed a couple of fresh scars on his side. He’d been hurt. No doubt someone had done this to him on purpose. Sick bastards. She hated violence of any kind. When against children and animals, it made her blood boil. She edged a bit closer still, torn between not wanting to scare him further and also keen to catch him and make him safe.

“It’s okay, baby. It’s alright. Shhh...” She reached out with the clean towel she carried. The puppy let out a silent bark and a pleading whine. “I know, I know. I got

you,” Olivia assured him. “I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

Finally, she managed to scoop him up, crawled back out, and emerged into the weak afternoon sun.

“He really is tiny,” Dana reflected as she took her first look at him.

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“Terrified and cold, too.”

“Yes. We’ll get him back to the practice and check him out. You okay?”

“Sure.”

“You look frozen.”

“Well, there is that,” Olivia chuckled.

Back in the truck, Dana turned the heating on while she kept the black-and-white puppy cradled protectively against her chest in a nest of fluffy towels.

“Was he hurt?”

“Yes. Looks like someone cut him. But it’s okay now, little buddy,” Olivia added in a gentle voice. “You’re still handsome. Adorable baby.”

“Don’t fall in love,” Dana cautioned.

“Too late. I think he may be the one for me.”

“Lately, you’ve been saying that with every new rescue we bring in, Oli,” Dana remarked.

“Yeah, but I mean it this time. He’s not trembling anymore, look. And he’s not taken his eyes off of me once.”

Olivia continued to cuddle and reassure the wet and scared puppy all the way to the veterinary practice.

“He’s healthy,” Dana confirmed after a thorough check-up. “The scars look good too, as much as these things can. Cute little Havanese. Let’s give him a bath and feed him some.”

“Yeah. I’ll take him home with me after that.”

“If you wish. But you know what they nickname this breed of dogs, right?”

“No, what?”

“Velcro. He’ll cling to you 24/7 if you let him.”

“That’s alright. This little guy clearly needs a lot of love and affection.”

“How about you?”

“What?” Olivia stared, dumbfounded.

“Weird transition, I know.” Her friend chuckled, fixing her with amused blue eyes.

“But really. How are you?”

“Fine.” Olivia shrugged. She ran warm soapy water into the sink and gently set the puppy down. He seemed okay with it as she began to scrub a layer of grime off his back gently. “Of course, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, because it’s been an abrupt end with Beth, and now I see you want to adopt every broken animal we rescue. So, makes me wonder.”

“What? If I’m broken?”

“No, but...”

“What, Dana?”

“You were pretty deep in that relationship.”

Olivia snorted, even as her heart tightened. “Hell, no. There are plenty of other mermaids in the sea.”

“If you say so.”

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“I certainly do.”

‘Pretty deep’ was stating it accurately, though. The sudden breakup with Beth, a local teacher Olivia had been dating for six wonderful months, or so she thought, had rocked her world in the worst way. Especially when the woman thought it was okay just to declare one day that she really preferred to be with men, and was going back to her ex. Olivia never saw that bombshell coming. She’d fallen hard and fast for Beth. For sure, the break-up hurt.

“It’s been almost a year now,” Dana reminded her gently. “You should go out with us sometime, Oli. Mel and I are off to Montreal next weekend for one of her conferences. Why don’t you come?”

Dana’s wife, Mel, was a popular author of lesbian fiction. Her work events attracted lots of avid readers, and sometimes also women in search of a good time, no strings attached. Olivia used to be into that sort of thing too. And having fun. But not since Beth. She rubbed scented shampoo over the puppy’s short coat and smiled as she noticed his eyelids start to droop.

“Better dry him up and feed him puppy formula before he drops, uh.”

“Olivia,” Dana prompted softly.

“Look, I’m not in the mood, okay?”

“I get that, but sometimes you gotta dust yourself off and saddle up again even if you don’t feel like it. You’re too young to give up. Not to mention gorgeous, as well.”

Olivia shot her a look, then pointedly glanced down at her mucky blue jeans and stained sweatshirt, covered in pet hairs, with a hole in the side. “You need glasses if you think this is gorgeous.”

“Oh, come off it, woman! You look like a butch version of Stefania Spampinato.”

“Spam what?”

“Italian actress my wife currently happens to have a crush on.” Dana laughed. “Think smoky, curvy in all the right places, with hair to die for, and gorgeous twinkling brown eyes.”

“Ah. Well.” Olivia shrugged, embarrassment warming her cheeks. “Okay. Thanks, I guess.”

“You’re welcome. So, will you think about it, at least?”

“Yeah, I will. For now, get me a bottle.”

“Sure thing. What should we name this one?”

“Hmm... How ‘bout Everett?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. The name just popped into my head when you asked. He looks like an Everett, I feel; distinguished. Like an older gentleman. Anyway, better than calling him ‘Velcro’, uh?”

“Yes.” Dana laughed. “Way better.”

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At about the same time Olivia fell asleep on her couch with an exhausted puppy curled up in her arms, Grace arrived at the popular Cuban dance club in South Beach. Friday was Bachata night, another stroke of good luck. She enjoyed Salsa, known for being fast, energetic, playful, and flirtatious. In contrast, Bachata was slow, sexy, and sensual. It was by far her favorite style. The Miami evening was hot and steamy despite the time of year, which fitted her mood perfectly. If there was one thing Grace disliked, it was the bitter winter cold of her native Vermont. She made her way slowly toward the bar, dressed in sand-colored slacks fitted at the waist, which tapered down nicely to cinch above her ankles. On her feet, she wore a pair of Dior, 'J'adior' slingback heels which retailed at \$1000. A narrow band of black Lycra around her torso covered her breasts adequately but left her back and tight stomach bare. Her shoulders were exposed, her blond hair slicked back. Grace noticed a few people glance her way and stare as she walked through the club. As the music flew over her, she felt an instant rush of excitement. Oh, yeah... She never failed to come alive in this sort of place and could feel her body waking up to the music. The layer of tension associated with her business persona would soon drop off.

"Ola chica!" The owner of the club glided toward her with open arms. "Ms. Michaels. It has been far too long."

"I agree." Grace returned his air kisses with an indulgent smile. "How are you, Roberto?"

"Ah, great. Business is great."

"Good to hear. I can see it, too."

"Will you save me a dance?"

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He laughed and gave her a little bow. “Estupendo!”

Grace soon located her hired date for the evening. The dark-skinned woman stood at the bar in a short black cocktail dress which stopped just above mid-thigh, and was kept from riding up by a couple loops of black lacing around her thighs. The dress hugged a slender and tight body that Grace remembered was delightfully responsive, in bed and on the dance floor alike. Magalie’s long black curly hair was held back with a red satin tie. The overall look was both simple and glamorous.

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“Good evening.” Grace slid her arms around her waist from behind and pressed herself lightly into her back. “May I join you?”

The woman flashed a blazing smile over her shoulder.

“Bonsoir, Mademoiselle Sky.” She greeted her in her native French. “It is a real pleasure to see you again.”

“Thank you for making time for me on short notice.”

“Oh, for you, always.”

Grace moved aside and signaled the bartender. “Can I get you a drink?”

“I’ll have what you have.”

“Hemingway daiquiri. No sugar. Two,” Grace ordered, and turned back to her companion with a smile of her own.

If she had wanted to, she could have walked straight into the club, had herself a dance, and found a partner for the rest of the evening. In the past, she often did just that. But success in her line of business had made her famous, and she could never be entirely sure of anyone’s motive. Would the tale of one night of passion end up plastered over the tabloids’ front page? With an illicit, stolen photo and lurid details? Grace did not mind paying a good price to guarantee her privacy. Also, she hated wasting time and knew she would be getting exactly what she wanted tonight. There was no rush, of course, but it helped her to relax and enjoy it more.

“I haven’t danced in a while,” Magalie informed her as they clinked glasses.

“That’s alright. You’re a natural at it.”

“Thank you, Ms. Sky.”

“Come closer.”

With her dark eyes glinting full of easy mirth and approval, Magalie complied. Grace was leaning back with one arm on the counter and her foot propped casually against the bar foot rail. As Magalie stepped in between her legs, she trailed a soft finger across her mouth in a possessive gesture, causing her lips to part open on a wanting sigh. Oh, yes... Grace tightened in reaction. The woman may like to cultivate an innocent look, and she was very good at it, but under that veneer, she was a consummate professional.

“It’s my birthday today.”

“Oh, happy birthday!”

“Thank you.” Grace caressed her face and the sides of her neck. She let her hand drift down the front of her dress and over her shapely side. “You’re beautiful.”

She used both hands to cup her ass; hard, without warning. Magalie should have anticipated this sort of move, really, but it made her gasp and stumble into her arms.

“Ms. Sky...” She laughed softly.

“Hmm. Yes.” Grace did not kiss her, but she trailed her lips along the underside of her jaw. It was definitely too long since she had done this, and indulged herself. She murmured against the woman’s ear. “So, you remember what I like?”

“How could I forget?” Magalie giggled.

“I’m glad I made an impression.”

“Certainly.”

“So, I take it you’ll be happy to play tonight?”

Grace had paid for her time, obviously, but consent was not automatically included in that price as far as she was concerned. Some may take it for granted since tastes, specific kinks, limits, likes, and dislikes were listed on the agency’s membership form. No one, escorts or clients, walked blindly into a date. Even so, Grace always liked to ask and confirm. Magalie nodded firmly in reply.

“Yes, Ms. Sky. I am totally on board with anything you might like to do tonight. Also...” She leaned in close and flashed her a mix of coy and wicked smile. “I am looking forward to every bit of it. You’re my favorite client.”

Grace chuckled. “Don’t you say that to all your clients?”

“Yes,” Magalie admitted frankly. “But with you, it’s always fun.”

This, at least, Grace knew was true. No woman would be able to fake multiple orgasms that well, not even an agency pro. Satisfied, she laced her arm around Magalie’s waist.

“Tres bien,” she declared. “Let’s dance.”

chapter 4

In the boardroom or on the dance floor, she was a natural leader. And though Magalie did turn out to be a little rusty at first, it did not take her long to recover her groove. Grace was patient, and she took real pleasure in guiding her through a sensual warm-up. She simply loved women; their complex psyches and extraordinary bodies, inner strength and alluring vulnerability. Not only did she like to lead, but to protect and enable her partners as well. Whether she paid good money for an encounter or not had nothing to do with her attitude toward them; she always took care to provide a safe and enjoyable connection. Bachata dancing, especially with a trusted partner, could also serve as wonderful foreplay when you were both on the same page. And they were. In the crowded intimacy of the dance club, under diffuse lighting which invited closeness, their experience turned heated and sensuous. Magalie responded beautifully to the interaction. She was playful and flirtatious in return. The dancing grew progressively more erotic until Grace concluded a popular Mr. Don number, one of her favorite Bachata songs, with a deep and languorous kiss.

“I think we should take this elsewhere, don’t you?”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” Magalie smiled against her ear.

Grace had booked a luxury room upstairs, which made for a smooth transition. She turned the heat up even more in the elevator by pushing Magalie against the wall and kissing her again. She made it hard and a little rough, the way she liked. The impulse to dominate sizzled in her blood. Magalie’s mix of a helpless and needy moan when she closed her fingers gently around her throat made her shiver. Submission, any style and flavor of it, was the woman’s specialty. Her response to Grace’s moves was

not contrived in the least. Not only was this a real pleasure, but also a rare gift. They stumbled into the bedroom, impatiently shedding items of clothing along the way. When they hit the King bed, and Magalie tried to steal the lead by rolling on top of her, Grace laughed. Oh, yes, this was going to be a delightful night. She was quick to right the situation, took hold of Magalie's wrists, and pinned her down.

"Now then. Feeling feisty, are we?"

"A little bit," Magalie answered teasingly.

"You know how I deal with disobedient girls like you, don't you?"

"No...?"

"Fibber."

The sight of Magalie under her in nothing but lacy lingerie, pretending so well not to have any idea of what would happen next, had Grace feeling hot, wet, and tight. She reached out with one hand and pinched her nipple through the lace, causing her partner to flinch and grin both at the same time. Magalie moved her arms, struggling just enough to make Grace tighten her hold. This, too, was a beautiful choreography. Grace leaned over her to deliver another blazing kiss.

"I see you need taming."

"Maybe..."

"Uh-huh. You do." Grace indulged herself by cupping her chin and rubbing a demanding thumb over her mouth, causing Magalie to gasp and a rush of blood to flow into her face. Even the slightest dominant gesture never failed to make her rise. She was gorgeous. "Stay right there."

“Yes, Ms. Sky.”

Grace had come prepared. She retrieved a couple of lengths of silk ties from her bag and watched Magalie’s dark eyes flash in anticipation.

“I want you restrained. First, tell me your safe word.”

“Indigo.”

“Okay.”

Magalie obviously remembered that her client enjoyed the thrill of a chase and subduing her partners. With this in mind, she gave her just the right amount of resistance. This caused her to lose her bra in the tussle when Grace ripped it off of her with a mischievous, ‘Oops!’. Predictably, Magalie ended up flat on her stomach with both wrists tethered to the bed posts. Grace slid a pillow under her hips and took a moment to caress her exposed buttocks.

“Who’s the boss here?” she murmured.

“You are.”

“Mistress.”

“Sorry.” Magalie wiggled a little bit and intentionally must have omitted to say the word.

Without missing a beat, Grace spanked her twice on each cheek, slightly harder than her partner probably expected her to do it.

“What do you say?”

“Sorry, Mistress.”

“That’s better.”

Grace yanked her panties down for a series of stinging slaps, which made Magalie gasp again and strain against her ties. It was for real this time, not for show, and incredibly satisfying for Grace. She smiled to herself as she caressed the heated flesh and admired the sleek muscles in Magalie’s back twitch and ripple with every micro-movement. She was pleased to have surprised her, and to feel her start to let go, even at this early stage. Sooner or later, they all surrendered. Grace stroked the back of her thighs.

“I want you to relax, okay?”

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“Yes, Mistress. Anything you say.”

“Good girl. Nice to see I’ve got your attention now.” Again without warning, Grace rubbed her fingers between her legs, causing Magalie to arch and moan sharply in reaction. “You are dripping wet, my dear.”

“Yes. You did get my attention, Ms. Sky.”

Grace chuckled, and she allowed the little slip, in the name of variety. She had tied her partner loosely enough to be able to flip her over when she wanted to, and she did so now, smiling at the sight of two erect nipples greeting her.

“What an amazing treat you are.”

“I am yours to command as you wish, Mistress.”

“Indeed. And I shall enjoy toying with you some more. For now, though, I think you should get to work. It is my birthday, after all.”

“I would love to, Mistress.”

Grace let her loose. She lay comfortably back on the pillows with one leg bent at the knee and a lazy finger beckoning her smiling, eager submissive forward.

“Put that lovely mouth of yours to good use, won’t you? Worship your queen.”

“Yes, Ms. Sky.”

“Do it well enough, and I might please you as well. Later,” Grace specified with a teasing chuckle. “Much later. And only if you beg.”

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She woke up the next morning feeling amazing. Fully restored and energized after a night of fun, naughty games, and multiple orgasms. But Grace was intrigued to find five missed calls on her phone, all from a number she did not recognize. There was one message:

‘Grace. Call me when you get this. It’s urgent.’

Ah. She did remember that voice, though it had been a few years since she’d heard it. It was female, tight, and pinched. Even when things were going well in her world, her younger sister, Chloe, seemed perpetually annoyed with the universe. I wonder what she must be after now.

“Good morning, Ms. Sky.” Magalie rolled over with a soft smile. “How did you sleep?”

“Incredibly well, thanks to you.”

“Great. I love a satisfied customer.”

“Hmm... Yes, very much so.” Grace did not often share her bed with an escort, but she had paid for the entire night. Also, it was after two A.M. by the time they were done, and she would not feel comfortable sending the woman off in a taxi on her own at that time. “How about you? You okay?”

“Yep, all good.” Magalie had that well-fucked look about her which made Grace stare a little longer than appropriate, and wonder what lazy morning-after sex might

be like with her. But Magalie was also all business now, even as she winked. “I’m off-duty.”

“Haha,” Grace chuckled. “Yes, indeed.”

“Mind if I grab a quick shower before I leave?”

“Sure, go ahead. Coffee?”

“Oh, yes, please! You are a dream client!”

Grace showered as well after the woman left, gathered her things, and made herself a second cup of coffee. Then she called her sister back.

“Grace. About time,” Chloe answered.

“Hello to you too,” Grace countered easily. “Your sunny disposition is always such a joy to experience. How are you doing, Chloe?”

“Busy. Would it kill you to answer the phone when I call?”

“Well, I was busy too, strange as it may seem.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Yes. With a lovely lady called Magalie.”

“Oh, cut the crap.”

“No crap, I assure you. It was quality entertainment.”

Once upon a time, Grace would have enjoyed rubbing it in. The more her family resented her ‘lesbianism’, as they called it, as if it were a disease, the more she was tempted to throw it in their faces. To shock, yes, but mainly to assert herself. No one would ever keep her in the closet, feeling ashamed. And if they tried to shut her down, she’d simply yell louder. Since then, she had matured a lot, if not exactly mellow. It helped that nobody in the world of dance cared about her sexuality, and many of her partners at the time were also fluid. As a business icon, the fact that Grace was a woman who loved women only added to her mystique and untamable vibe.

“Since I haven’t got all day, why don’t you tell me why you called?” she encouraged her sister. “I don’t assume it was to wish me a happy birthday.”

As anticipated, Chloe did not even acknowledge this.

“Charlie is in the hospital,” she just supplied resentfully.

Charlie. Grace had to sit down quickly and set her coffee on a nearby table as her entire body went weak at the news. Christ. Charlie. To be fair, even she had forgotten

her own birthday and then been otherwise engaged. If not, it would have occurred to her to check on her aunt. Charlie never missed a birthday.

“Is she okay?” she snapped. “What happened?”

“She’s fine. The doctor said it was a heart attack.”

“Oh, God. Are you sure? Not a stroke?”

“Heart attack, I said,” Chloe spat. “I know the difference.”

Because she wanted details and knew her sister would not be forthcoming, Grace swallowed her anger and switched off her emotions. She was good at compartmentalizing, and this conversation clearly required it.

“What’s the prognosis?”

“Not too bad.”

Chloe’s shrug was almost audible. Or was it a sneer? Was she enjoying making her beg for scraps of information? Grace would not have been surprised to find out it was the case.

“Which hospital is she at?”

“Red Falls General, of course.”

Of course. Chloe never missed a chance to express dismissal and disdain, even when it was unwarranted. Grace gritted her teeth for control.

“You got the name of the doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it to me now.”

“Watkins. So, are you going to fly over?”

Ah... Now then. A slight lifting in her tone caught Grace’s attention. Did she detect a touch of hope there? Or anticipation? Whatever it was, it made her instantly suspicious And wary as hell.

“Why?” she prompted. “You want me to come?”

“I don’t give a damn either way. I just want to be kept in the loop, that’s all.”

“So, you do, then.”

“What?”

“Give a damn.”

“Grace—”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Of course not. Don’t be weird.”

“Is everyone else okay?”

By ‘everyone else,’ Grace referred mainly to their father, to whom she had not spoken for ages. His choice more than hers, though it had been so long now that she wasn’t sure she even cared. She also had two younger brothers; twins. Their mother had died at the age of sixty-two in a road accident.

“What do you care, Grace?” Chloe decided to challenge her. “It’s not like you bother to check in with us the rest of the time, huh?”

Typical. When they’d all made the situation unbearable for her at home, they blamed her for leaving. And now, this kind of bullshit...

“Perhaps if you showed more interest in engaging with me in a peaceful way, I would check in more often,” Grace pointed out. “It’s not like I haven’t been trying to maintain a connection, is it?”

“Have you?” Chloe snorted. “That’s news to me.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Why did you call, really?”

“I know you care about Charlie, Grace. So, that’s why. Just be fucking grateful, okay?”

Chloe was going to stick to her guns, obviously, and Grace did not care enough about her reasons to want to push it. One thing was for sure, she did not believe her sister. Every time one of the siblings got in touch with her over the years was always to ask for something. A favor, money, a business introduction... No matter, she’d find out soon enough. For now, Grace only just wanted to connect with her aunt.

“Thanks for calling,” she said.

“Are you going to—”

Grace did not listen to the rest, and she hung up on her.

chapter 5

Olivia was feeling proud of her latest creation. The sculptural minimalist piece had been a nice challenge for her. Though she loved rescuing pets, especially puppies, this was only voluntary part-time work. The bulk of her time was spent in her workshop on the outskirts of town, shaping big slabs of wood into bespoke furniture for her clients. This latest piece was an epoxy resin wooden table, intricately designed into a leaf, with strategic lines of natural amber and amethyst crystal carved along the surface to simulate the veins of the leaf. Olivia was extra-careful loading it into the back of her van for delivery, and even more so as she drove the twenty miles to the next town on a light dusting of snow. It was a bit early in the year for this, but she was pleased. She loved snow, the colder months, Christmas... And snuggling in front of the fire with a woman in her arms. Well. These days, it happened to be a puppy. She chuckled at the idea, surprising herself in a good way. Too long since she had been able to make light of such things, and it was nice. Dana might be right, after all. Perhaps it was time to get back in the saddle.

“Whoa...” Feeling the van go a little floaty around a bend, she reminded herself to slow down and focus. “Whatever you do, don’t crash the custom piece.”

She made it safe and sound to her client’s house, a retired real estate broker from San Diego who’d made his fortune over there. He greeted her in the driveway with a friendly wave and a cup of hot chocolate.

“Ooh, thanks, Mr. Sorenson.” She laughed. “I could do with one of these.”

“The weather calls for it, I feel. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“That’s why we moved to Vermont,” his wife pitched in with a happy smile. “California weather is great, but I grew tired of the fires, earthquakes, and staring at blue skies and palm trees for Christmas.”

“I’ve heard we should have an especially snowy one this year,” Olivia shared.

“Great!” they exclaimed in unison.

“And now,” Sorenson added, “let’s unload and take a look at this beauty.”

“Yes,” Olivia approved. “Let’s.”

Every piece was a unique design, and every client’s wishes and instructions were a little different. Olivia was always slightly nervous when she presented the final result. However, after so many years in the business, it was more a sense of anticipation than any real fear of disappointing. This being said, the couple’s initial silence when they first laid eyes on the table made her hold her breath. She relaxed when Sorenson finally whistled in appreciation, and his wife brought both hands to her chest in a similar gesture.

“Oh, my God! This is gorgeous! Jim, look at how intricate it is!”

“A real work of art,” he nodded.

“So much detail... So finely carved!” Mrs. Sorenson leaned close to observe an amber line streaking through the hardwood. “Incredible. It looks just like lace!”

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Sorenson shook Olivia's hand with a smile. "You, my dear, are incredibly talented. Great job."

"Thanks. I'm glad you both like it."

"It's a masterpiece!" Mrs. Sorenson beamed. "Exactly what I had in mind. Thank you, Olivia!"

Back on the road with a lovely feeling of satisfaction, Olivia turned the radio up. And sang along with the mushy Christmas songs all the way back to Red Falls.

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"Damn weather," Grace muttered under her breath. "Surely it's too early for this crap."

And for the tired old Christmas songs playing on a loop on the radio as well! She switched it off and tried to settle her mood. The rental company at the airport had tried to set her up with a Tesla. She refused. Then, she argued and threatened when they told her that nothing else was available. Eventually, they produced a Ford Ranger with adequate snow tires. Now, she could drive on snow just fine... But she missed her Ferrari. Grace went straight from the airport to the hospital, only to be advised that Mrs. Sheridan had already been released. Nobody had bothered to keep her updated, which was no big surprise but still pissed her off some. The cardiologist was in the middle of a triple-bypass surgery, so Grace could not speak to her. And everyone else who had treated her aunt was currently off-shift. At least they'd let her go, so she must be okay. But if she is, why didn't she call me? Grace made her way to

her aunt's house next, determined to find out what was going on. She parked on the street, stalked to the front door, and pressed the doorbell button. Glancing up to the corner, she was glad to find the door cam she'd had installed blinking green. Despite her protests that she did not require any of, 'this kind of insane technology', Charlie was using it. Grace smiled in affection and anticipation, though it faded rather quickly when a woman she did not know opened the door instead of her beloved aunt.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

She sounded right at home there. And boy... Grace blinked at her clothes. Well-worn work boots, loose jeans riding low on her hips, a white t-shirt, and the obligatory plaid shirt made her look like the front cover model of Butch Magazine. If there was such a thing, of course... But Grace suppressed a snort. All that was missing to complete the look was an axe slung over her shoulder. Did the woman attempt to look like a lumberjack? As she returned her gaze, nice and steady, it also occurred to Grace that she was extremely beautiful. Glossy dark hair, attractively short and windswept; a round, intelligent face; and sparkling chocolate-brown eyes, currently busy taking her in. Checking me out, Grace realized. She felt instantly annoyed at the realization, even though she was used to women looking at her that way, and had been doing exactly the same thing.

"Who the hell are you?" she inquired sharply.

The stranger raised an amused eyebrow. "I'm Olivia. And you?"

"That's none of your—"

"Grace!"

The woman named Olivia shifted aside at the happy shriek behind her. In the next instant, Grace found herself embraced by a pair of warm, tight, familiar arms.

“Charlie—”

“Oh my goodness, child! You are here! Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I tried to reach you at the hospital, but I guess no one told you.”

“Nope.”

“I left a message on your cell, too.”

“Oh, I think it’s probably dead.”

“Yeah. So I thought I’d just get over here and talk to you in person.”

“That’s my girl. Razor-sharp efficient as always.”

“Hmm.” Grace fixed her with an assessing gaze. “Why do you smell of freshly baked cookies?”

“Well, because I was baking some, of course.”

“Christ, Charlie. Didn’t you just have a heart attack?”

“Yes, dear, but it was only a minor one.”

The small woman with snow-white hair tied loosely at the back of her neck was dressed in gray sweatpants, thick slippers with tiny white reindeer over them, and an oversized Boston Bruins hoodie. Though she eyed her with a beaming smile, as always, Grace could see that she was pale, and her blue eyes lacked their lively glint. Her high-energy relative usually looked a lot younger than her seventy-five years of age... But not today, and it was a startling reminder for Grace that her aunt would not

always be there.

“You should be resting,” she declared.

“That’s what I told her too,” the dark-haired woman stated with a smile, and Grace shot her a look.

“Olivia volunteered to take Jerry for a walk with her own puppy. She was just about to make us both a cup of tea, so now you can join us. Oh, Grace... I’m so glad you’re here.”

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“So am I.” Grace forgot about the stranger for a moment as she led her aunt to the living room and sat her down on the couch. Jerry, her cocker spaniel, and a small puppy, indeed, were fast asleep in Jerry’s basket. Grace ignored them both. She did not mind pets, but she was not dog-mad as some people were. “So, tell me,” she prompted. “What happened? And how are you doing?”

“I’m fine, but I’d been feeling a bit tired of late,” her aunt admitted. “Achy, and with a lingering headache for a few days. You know?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I put it down to the change in season, and maybe pushing myself a bit too hard in the garden, prepping for winter. I was at the store the other day when I started to feel really weird. Dizzy. My chest got very tight, and I lost my breath. I blacked out for a moment... Not long, just a couple of seconds. But it was scary.”

“I bet it was.” Grace gently squeezed her hands. “How long were you in the hospital?”

“Just overnight.”

“I’m sorry it took me longer than that to get here.”

“Don’t be, Grace, darling. I know how busy you are with all your contracts, and I wouldn’t have asked. I was going to call you today and explain everything. Did our stubborn Chloe beat me to it?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Well, I told her not to. I didn’t want you to worry until I had a chance to talk to you myself.”

“For once, I’m glad she didn’t listen. Come on, Charlie, how serious is it?”

“Luckily, just a mild heart issue. No surgery required.”

“That’s a relief.” Grace exhaled.

“Yes. They gave me drugs at the hospital to break down a tiny clot and restore blood flow. My doctor said I’ll be fine. She just recommended I do a bit more exercise.”

Grace glanced at the high-tech exercise bike in the corner of the room, which was currently being used as an additional coat hanger.

“Yeah,” she smirked. “That’s why I bought you this damn thing.”

“And I am grateful.” Charlie nodded with a sheepish grin. “Really. I know I’ll feel a lot more motivated to spend time on it now.”

“That’s good, although bound not to last very long if you ask me.” Grace could not help herself. “You know, it has nothing to do with motivation.”

“Oh?”

“That’s right. It’s about discipline, pure and simple.” She ignored the woman’s amused chuckle in the background. Why was she still hanging around? Didn’t she have dogs to walk? Trees to fell? Or something? “What else did your doctor advise?” she asked. “Anything at all?”

“Yes,” Charlie nodded. “She said I should probably adopt more of a plant-based diet. Olivia was just giving me some tips about that when you arrived. She’s a vegan.”

Ah. Grace suppressed another snort, in polite deference to her aunt, who seemed to really like the younger woman. But yes, the vegan thing fitted the overall image.

“We could get you a personal trainer to help you stay on track with your fitness routine,” she offered.

“Oh, I can’t afford it, love.”

“I’ll pay for it, of course. And for a professional nutritionist as well. Unless that’s what you are, Ms...” Grace raised a sharp eyebrow in the woman’s direction. Noticed her dark eyes widen ever so slightly.

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So, this was the famous Grace Michaels? Phew! She radiated such fierce energy that Olivia was a little surprised the windows had not shattered. It was a bit of an exaggeration, for sure, but still... She could feel the vibe nice and strong. She had heard a lot about the successful designer from Charlie’s own mouth. Obviously, the reverse must not be true.

“It’s Bianchi,” she answered. “Feel free to call me Olivia.” When Grace simply stared in expectant silence, she remembered the question. ”No, I’m not a nutritionist. I just love cooking and cruelty-free food.”

“Olivia is an artist, Grace,” Charlie offered warmly while a daring Everett cautiously went to sniff at the woman’s expensive-looking shoes. “She also volunteers part-time at the vet office to rescue abandoned pets.”

“I see. Good for you.”

Grace could not have sounded less enthusiastic if she tried. Olivia chuckled, amused and intrigued at the same time.

“Yeah, thanks, Ms. Michaels.”

chapter 6

Using her first name did not occur to Olivia at the moment, and Grace did not offer it. Well...Olivia was not used to people taking an instant dislike to her, though, for some reason, the simple fact that she was here, breathing the same air, seemed to annoy her friend's relative. Olivia was curious about her. The way Grace had raked her crystal-clear blue eyes over her at the door may have quite a bit to do with it. The deliberate once-over had made Olivia feel X-rayed from top to bottom. Dissected, almost. And stripped naked, more or less. Michaels had done this with the aplomb and confidence of a woman used to undressing others, with her eyes and otherwise. Or so Olivia estimated. In turn, she found it a little difficult to take her eyes off her. It was true that Grace Michaels could not be said to be her type. Olivia did not usually go for hard, driven, badass businesswomen. She tended to favor slightly softer characters. Then again, Michaels was also fantastically female in appearance. She hit the uber-femme vibe beautifully in tailored black slacks, which must cost more than Olivia's entire wardrobe, high-gloss ankle boots, and a fitted white linen shirt under an old-style livery frock coat, maroon, with antique golden embroidery on the front. Her full-bodied platinum blond hair, cut in a sleek bob, rustled attractively every time she moved her head. A choppy fringe highlighted almond-shaped, intelligent blue eyes. With her sculpted cheekbones and dramatic jawline, Grace Michaels was definitely a looker. Forget finding it just a little difficult to look away. Olivia found herself staring way too hard instead. This earned her another cutting glance from

Grace.

“Okay.” Man! The woman was intense. “I should leave you to it and take the dogs for that walk.”

“Thank you, Oli.” As Charlie smiled, Olivia noticed Grace quirk an eyebrow as if she had a problem with the shortening of her name. “Be quick with it, and you can have a cup of tea with us. We’ll save you a cookie.”

Olivia wondered if Grace Michaels would save her one, or throw it in her face, more like. She whistled to Jerry and Everett, nodded to the two women, and promised herself to take her time out there.

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Grace relaxed the second Olivia left the room. She had no idea why she was tense, but something about the other woman made her feel on edge.

“She’s a good girl,” Charlie declared, clearly not using the qualifier in the same way that Grace routinely did with her erotic play partners.

“Uh-huh. Is she a new friend of yours?”

“Kinda new, yes. I met her at the vet a couple months ago. We started talking, and she said she’d be happy to walk Jerry for me when the weather got bad. Or if it’s snowing a lot.”

Grace had never heard her aunt complain about this kind of thing before.

“Is your hip bothering you a lot?” she asked.

“It’s been tighter than usual. But still, not too bad.”

“You know, Charlie, you don’t have to grit your teeth and just suffer through this. My offer to you still stands.”

“I know. Thank you. But I’d be lost in Miami, darling.”

“Not for long, I’m sure. And the warmer weather would be much kinder on your joints. You could join a salsa class, make friends and exercise at the same time.”

“Oh, Grace.” Charlie laughed and patted her warmly on the thigh. “I dread to think what I’d be like on the dance floor. If I ever moved to Miami, it would be to be close to you.”

“That would be nice.”

“It would. But you know I belong here. In this house... It is my home.”

She glanced at the smiling portrait of her late husband on the fireplace mantel. They had been married for twenty-seven years. Lived in the same house, yes. He’d passed away in 2017 after a short illness, in his own bed, with his wife by his side. Grace nodded in respectful understanding.

“Maybe you could just come to visit a bit more often,” she offered. “Give yourself a break when you need it.”

“That I would like very much, yes.”

“We’ll work something out. Maybe in January to escape the worst of the freezing cold.”

“What about Jerry?”

“Jerry can come too. What are you doing for Christmas and New Year?”

“I’ll be in Burlington. Just the usual, you know?”

“Hmm.” Grace winced imperceptibly. “Yes.”

Her father still lived in Burlington, in the stone mansion all the kids had grown up in. The residence lacked a lot of character. Well, at least according to Grace, who knew a thing or two about such things. It did have enough rooms to accommodate the entire family for Christmas, which used to be important to her mother. The holidays remained a big deal for the Michaels, with all the kids expected to attend Christmas lunch. As the black sheep of the clan, Grace was never invited. Looking on the bright side, she supposed it saved her having to decline. Her father, John Michaels, had done well for himself in the seventies, buying and developing property. He was not into design or hospitality but very good at spotting opportunities and putting talented managers into place. Once the new business was up and running smoothly, he would sell it for profit and re-invest the money into something else. He applied the same formula to bars, restaurants, and nightclubs all over the US, becoming a multi-millionaire in the process. When Grace was five years old, he acquired an old crumbling building and some land on the shore of Lake Champlain. He decided to keep this piece of property and, over the years, turned it into one of the top vacation spots in the country. The Red Eagle Golf and Spa Resort catered to the rich and famous. Movie stars, singers, sports icons... Even the odd royal from time to time. The plan had always been for Grace to take over after her father’s retirement. But then... Well. ‘Shit happened’. Her brothers, Chloe, and her husband were in charge of running the family business now.

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“I always miss you so much at the Christmas table, Grace,” Charlie added softly. Thoughtfully. “Have you got any plans for this year?”

“Nothing much. I’ll be working, probably.” Grace answered with a flat shrug. “You know I don’t care much about traditional stuff for the sake of conforming. Christmas is just another day on the calendar as far as I’m concerned.”

“Come here,” her aunt invited, pulling her closer.

She was smart and sensitive enough not to push that topic. Grace passed her a forbidden cookie, which made Charlie smile. And she settled back on the couch with one arm resting loosely around her shoulders.

“How are things with the rest of the family?” she prompted. “Chloe was pretty weird on the phone when she called. Like she had a major ulterior motive for doing so.”

“Should I tell you?” Charlie inquired.

Puzzled at the hesitation, Grace looked at her. “Well. Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t you? What’s going on?”

“You won’t like it, my darling. The business is facing some trouble.”

“The resort?”

“Yes.”

“No way!” Grace chuckled in disbelief. “How can a five-star hotel in such a prime location, attached to a Michelin-star restaurant, glorious golf course, and luxury health spa, be facing financial trouble? It’s four businesses into one, all individually successful. The resort has been going strong for, like, forever!”

“Yes, but I didn’t say financial trouble.”

“What then?”

“You won’t like it,” Charlie repeated, though she sounded resigned.

“I never do, do I? Not when it comes to family stuff, which includes the resort. Come on. Give it to me straight.”

“It’s your brother, Reece,” Charlie confided. “Rumor has it that he behaved... inappropriately.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Sexually inappropriate behavior.”

“What?” Grace almost choked on the word. “Reece?”

“Yes, with a massage therapist who works at the spa. She alleges he followed her into a treatment room after closing time when she was tidying up. According to her, he attempted to force her to undress. When she did not comply, he got a little rough. And then, he fired her.”

“Christ.” Grace blinked hard as her initial reluctance turned to dismay and a rush of powerful disgust. “Reece... My brother sexually assaulted a woman?”

“Allegedly.”

“No witnesses?”

“No. He claims the woman is lying, so it’s her word against his, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Grace noted the use of the word ‘claim’. As if Charlie were not convinced of his innocence.

“Even so, there were instant repercussions. Two days later, half the rest of the staff walked out in solidarity. Clients showed up for their treatments and found the place in disarray. It even made the evening news that night.”

“Oh, that’s not good.”

“Not good at all. Then, an assistant bartender came forward to say something similar happened to her. It made everything even worse.”

Grace understood now. There was nothing like a good sexual scandal involving a rich resort owner to sink an established reputation. Add to this the wrong kind of media attention, targeted social media posts... It might not be enough to close the business, but it could do significant damage. Was Reece really that stupid? He could be entitled, yes; she knew that about him. But a sexual predator? The mere thought of it made her skin crawl.

“Is the police involved?”

“No.” Charlie sighed.

“Not yet, you mean?”

“Hopefully, they won’t be at all. It’s all calmed down a bit since Mark told Reece to lie low.”

As a former litigation lawyer turned marketing consultant, Chloe’s husband would be a real asset in this kind of situation. The man had more business acumen and flair than all the rest of her siblings put together. If anyone could spin this story into a less damaging tale for Reece, it would be him. Grace thought of the women involved. As far as she knew, landing a job at the resort was a great deal for anyone looking to work in the hospitality sector. They would have a lot to lose if it turned out they were lying. So, would they? And for what reason?

“Do you think Reese is guilty?” she asked bluntly.

“Oh, Grace, I don’t know. It hurts me even to entertain the possibility. You know our Reece. Always such a charmer and the flirty type. But to try to force a woman...” Charlie shivered, and she left her sentence unfinished. “I dread to think of it.”

“So do I.” Grace could picture it in her mind’s eye, though. Yeah, Reece was a hell of a charmer. Handsome, mischievous, funny. Always a clear favorite with the ladies. But she knew he was also a spoilt boy who did not deal too well with things not going his way. It was not that much of a stretch for Grace to envision him crossing a line. Hopefully, by mistake. But twice? And trying to cover himself by firing someone? For sure, she did not like the sound of that. Noting the strain across her aunt’s tired

face, she hugged her softly. “I’m sorry to make you think about this stuff. You should be resting, and I’m getting in the way of your recovery.”

“It’s okay, darling, I don’t mind.” Charlie was pale, though.

“I’ll speak to Chloe,” Grace assured her. “How about you go on upstairs and catch up on some sleep?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Alright, good.”

“Oh, but Olivia’s still out with Jerry...”

“It’s okay; I’ll wait for them to get back.”

Charlie put her arms around her waist as Grace helped her to stand up. “Thank you, darling. How long are you planning to visit? I don’t want to waste it on sleep if you’ll be in and out.”

Though she’d hoped to be back in Miami by the weekend, at the very latest, family issues may require her presence in Red Falls a bit longer. Most of all, Grace did not like the anxious look in Charlie’s eyes.

“I’ll stay long enough to catch up with you properly,” she promised. “I’ve got a room at the Forester, so I can work without disturbing you. I’ll go check in, speak to Chloe, and come back to see you late afternoon.”

“Great. We could have dinner if you like. I have your favorite lasagna in the freezer. Real meat.”

“Wonderful. We can plan your stay in Miami as well.”

Charlie relaxed. “I really missed you, Grace.”

“Yes. Me too.”

chapter 7

Grace tidied up in the kitchen while waiting for the dog walker to return. Had the woman decided to go on a marathon or what? What was taking so long? She took the opportunity to check her messages and gave her PA a quick call.

“Hi, Ms. Michaels.”

“How are things?”

Libby was used to keeping her reports concise when her boss checked in, which could often be at odd hours, any time of day or night. In less than a minute, she gave her a thorough update on their ongoing projects, ending with a favorite line.

“Everything is fine and under control.”

“Excellent. Keep it that way.”

“Will do. Is it snowing where you are?”

“Yes, coming down hard.”

“Aw... It must be so lovely!”

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“For about a minute, yeah, and then it turns into disgusting gray-black sludge.” Grace did not give her a chance to comment further. She did not pay her assistant a small fortune to waste time talking about the weather, did she? “Thank you, Libby. I’ll be in touch.”

“Bye, Ms. Michaels.”

Grace hung up and glanced impatiently at her watch. For God’s sake! Just then, the front door opened, and a wet spaniel burst in. Olivia came in behind in a cloud of freezing air. The puppy was in her arms, tucked safely inside the front of her shirt.

“Phew!” She grinned, shaking snow out of her hair in a fair impression of her canine friends. “Proper storm out there now!”

Grace raised a wondering, unsympathetic eyebrow.

“You have a key to this place?”

“Uh... Yeah?”

“You’re not sure?”

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Olivia blinked at the question and the unnecessary sharpness of her tone. She stared in genuine surprise, then chuckled. Wow! “Are you for real?”

She'd enjoyed her walk with the two dogs frolicking in the snow and watching Everett engage Jerry in some play. It was pretty cold out, though, so she eventually scooped him up, called out to Jerry, and headed back home in search of warmth. Now the two dogs were defrosting in front of the fire, Charlie must have gone to rest, and she was left to face Grace Michaels' glacial stare. It occurred to Olivia that it was actually an interesting situation. Perhaps she could make it so a bit more by giving back as good as she received. Grace looked at her as if she were dim.

"I just wonder." She shrugged, piercing blue eyes tracking her every movement like a hunter following her prey. "You have a key, and you seem at home here, yet Charlie never mentioned you to me."

"Ah, now you're hurting my feelings."

"Looks like it doesn't take much, in this case."

Touche. Well, sort of. Olivia shed her coat in the kitchen, and she helped herself to a cookie. After all, she had helped to bake them.

"Would you like one?" She thrust the plate toward Grace with a smile other women usually found charming.

"No. I want you to answer my question." Grace Michaels was obviously not charmed in the least. "I'm sure you have my aunt's best interests at heart, but then again, I don't know. You are a lot younger."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"It seems like an odd friendship, that's all."

"Well, maybe to you."

“Not maybe. So...”

Grace rolled her index finger in an impatient ‘Get on with it’ gesture. Beyond rude, really. However, she was protective of her aunt, which Olivia could understand and appreciate.

“I met Charlie at the vet a while back,” she answered. “We started talking in the waiting room, and she said she might need someone to take Jerry on his walks when the weather gets cold. So, I volunteered.”

“Why?”

“I love dogs and animals in general. I run a rescue project with Dana. She’s the local vet and a good friend.”

“I’ve heard of Dana.”

“Right. There, you see? I’m not such a stranger. Charlie gave me a spare key; I didn’t ask. And she has one to my house also. She waters the plants for me if I go away for work. We help each other out like that. The age difference is no factor in our friendship.”

“Okay. Fair enough, I guess.”

“I’m thirty-five, by the way.”

“You look younger.” This sounded like a private comment.

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Grace Michaels then once again flicked her gaze over her in an appraising and not at all unpleasant manner. Olivia decided it might be safe to ask if she would be spending Christmas in town. She was wrong; it obviously was not a good idea. All it earned her was a single, sharp ‘No’ in reply.

“Ah. Well. Even so, I know Charlie must be delighted to see you. She—”

“Talks about me a lot,” Grace cut her abruptly. “Yeah, you said.”

Man, what a piece of work! Even as Grace crossed her arms across her chest, an obvious signal to deter her, Olivia stood her ground.

“That’s not what I was going to say to you now.” Thinking it might irritate the woman even more and, for some insane reason, eager to provoke her and get under her skin, she fished out an open pack of doggy treats from the cupboard. Then shook it, prompting an excited bark and a mad scramble from the other room, and shoved it into Grace’s hands. Just to see what she would do. “Do you like dogs?”

A shrug. “Dogs are fine.”

“Cool. What’s your puppy’s name?”

Grace flashed the kind of look that said Olivia was toying with disaster. “I don’t have one. No time or inclination.”

She did feed a couple of treats to each dog, though, without really looking at either of them. Then she more or less slammed the box back onto the counter and returned

both hands to her hips. Combative. Fiery. Gorgeous, really. And a little strange, for sure. Olivia wondered how any human with a functioning heart in their body could resist picking up little Everett, who sat fixing Grace with hopeful brown eyes. Or, at least, scratching his head. He even lifted one paw clumsily in the air in the most adorable puppy hello, but the woman went on ignoring him. Olivia was both appalled and fascinated in equal measures.

“So,” Grace prompted. “What were you going to say to me before I so rudely interrupted you?”

Mocking her, Olivia realized. And to be honest, she’d been looking for it.

“Just that the situation with your brother hit Charlie hard,” she replied, seriously now.

“Hmm. Yeah. Unfortunately, I only just found out about it.” Frustration sizzled across Grace’s face, and a flash of anger, but these were only brief. She was quick to catch herself. When she smiled, it was so unexpected that Olivia was taken aback. And there was more. “Charlie said you’re a good girl.”

“Oh, did she?” Olivia chuckled in embarrassment. Damn if she did not feel herself blush at the same time. “I do my best to be helpful.”

Grace nodded just once, eyes locked onto hers like two laser beams. “Yes. Thank you for that.”

“No problem.”

Well, what a surprise. It seemed the icy Miami legend could crack a sizzling smile when she wanted to. There was fire in her blue eyes, and when she smiled, her entire face lit up. It made her look younger, too, and always truly beautiful. Olivia melted a bit and, just like that, forgot again to be careful.

“Will you be staying in Burlington, then?”

“No.” The shift in Grace’s tone was like whiplash, though at least she did not remind her that it was none of her business. “I am here for Charlie. Why would I stay twenty-five miles away?”

“Um, yes, good point.”

“Indeed.”

“I know the rest of your family live there, so I just assumed that you would—”

“You’re best not to assume things about me.” Grace glanced down at Everett, still doing his best to catch her attention, with as much warmth as the snow outside. “Anyway. Gotta go.”

Olivia stunned herself with what came out of her mouth next, even if, of course, it would not be the first time she’d sprung this kind of invitation. But not since her breakup with Beth... And never on a woman like Grace, who consistently came across like hugging a cactus may be less painful.

“Hey, we should have dinner. How about it?”

As expected, Grace stared as if she’d just been told that two plus two were sixty-nine. Olivia had no idea why this particular number popped into her head at this precise moment. Or perhaps, more precisely, she refused to acknowledge it. The answer came, predictably curt and negative.

“No,” Grace said.

Even so, watching her, Olivia was pretty sure that she’d at least considered it. Maybe

for a micro-second? Foolishly, it gave her hope. Why she should suddenly feel so keen was not entirely clear to her, but never mind.

“Why not?”

“You’re not my type.”

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“Then why do your eyes sparkle so bright when you look at me?”

“Don’t push your luck, Ms. Bianchi.”

Oh, but Olivia so wanted to! It was such a long time since she had felt this kind of thrill of possibility. Also, Grace may say she wasn’t interested and that she had to leave, but she still had not made it to the door.

“Your type don’t eat food?” Olivia pushed a little, playfully.

“My type eats steak and fish,” Grace declared. “As do I. And we enjoy it.”

A keen activist who did not mince her words on the subject of non-existent animal rights, Olivia still instinctively refrained from launching into her usual informational speech. She chose to keep it more personal and on target.

“I happen to be a great cook.”

“How lovely for you.”

“Come for dinner. Let me convince you.”

“No need, I believe you totally.”

Though this was said with a bit of a condescending smirk, Grace remained standing in the middle of the kitchen, watching her with sparkling eyes, indeed. As if daring her to keep trying. Was that Olivia’s imagination? Is she toying with me? Well, duh...

But why was she having such a great time?

“Your loss,” she said with a light shrug and a smile of her own. She noticed Grace’s eyes follow her movements when she cocked a hip and hooked her thumbs into the belt loops of her jeans. “Most people think that vegans survive on nuts and lettuce, but it’s not the case. Plant-based food is incredibly varied and flavorful if you know what you’re doing in the kitchen.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“At least tell me what your type is?”

Grace did not miss a beat. “Not baby butch dykes like you.”

The bold characterization left Olivia momentarily stunned and definitely at a loss for a good retort. Hearing these words on Grace Michaels’ immaculate lips also made her feel instantly hot. Meanwhile, Grace brushed against her side on her way out of the kitchen. Intentionally too close? Olivia was fairly sure this was deliberate taunting. Pretty exquisite, too... As was the way that Grace briefly cupped her cheek as she went past as if to take any potential sting out of her words. The gesture could be felt as a little patronizing, which, knowing her, must be no mistake. But it was also thrilling and over too soon. Olivia supposed this saved her from embarrassing herself with a spontaneous response. Like leaning into the surprisingly warm touch and closing her eyes to savor it. She swallowed a little too hard and knew that Grace had noticed. She struggled for an appropriate response. ‘I’m not a baby’ was the first thing that popped into her head, but it would make her sound like a human version of her puppy. Denying the other two adjectives would be lying.

“How old are you?” she challenged instead. “Can’t be much older than me, huh?”

“I’m old enough to know better.”

“All I did was offer to cook you a vegan meal.”

Grace’s indulgent look let her know she did not believe this for a second. It occurred to Olivia that she was correct. Fired up by the exchange and the woman who so effortlessly controlled the shots, she flashed a knowing grin of her own.

“At least for our first date, just dinner.”

“What a vivid imagination you have.”

“I’m creative in lots of ways. You’d like it.”

“Of course.” Irony dripped off her tongue with every word of fake agreement. “No doubt you’d rock my world.”

Grace slipped on a long leather coat that made her look like an attractive modern-day gunslinger. The knowledge that it was real leather made Olivia want to scream... But she could not deny that the supple style of the jacket, at least, looked amazing on Grace. The woman was half a head taller than her own 5 ft. 5. Limber. Ruthlessly dismissive in a way Olivia was surprised to find so addictive.

“One drink, then,” she proposed as Grace reached the front door.

“One thing I must say is you are persistent.”

“Thank you.”

“And also dangerously close to begging.”

“Would you like it if I did?”

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The fact that Grace paused long enough to deliver another smile and a look so blatantly sexual that it made Olivia moisten her lips in reaction felt like a tiny but tremendous victory. When she proceeded to walk out the door without answering, Olivia revised that opinion, even as it made her laugh.

chapter 8

Olivia Bianchi may think herself tough, but the mushy look in her eyes when she held her puppy gave her away as not only a baby butch dyke, but a super-softie one at that. Her sweet but naive attempts at convincing Grace to have dinner with her, at least to begin with, only confirmed this. She would be frighteningly easy to seduce, Grace concluded, and probably already halfway there. Her kind was bound to bruise easily under a thin layer of daring attitude, so definitely not her type. And she was Charlie's good friend. Grace would be crazy to risk messing that up. Having taken the measure of Olivia, she did approve of the friendship. On top of the rest, the woman also struck her as dependable and resourceful. Her aunt could do with someone like that around since she could not be convinced to move to Miami, especially after her recent health scare. With this in mind, Grace called the hospital and made an appointment with her cardiologist.

"Dr. Watkins will be able to see you tomorrow morning at eight o'clock if that suits you," a helpful secretary advised her.

"Perfect. Thank you."

As Grace drove through downtown Red Falls, she thought back to her encounter with Olivia. The more she looked at her, the more she had to admit that the woman really

was beautiful. A touch of subtle makeup to highlight her velvety brown eyes, a smart haircut to emphasize her appealingly round face, and less baggy clothes, would reveal a stunningly attractive woman. She reminded herself that she was not interested and focused on the road instead. Same old, same old... Red Falls never changed much, and the road to Burlington looked like she could have been on it just yesterday. To Grace, everything appeared utterly familiar, but also as if she were observing it at a distance or through a pane of glass. Removed. Detached. She no longer belonged here. Not sure she ever did. And she would not allow the memories of the place to touch her. There was nothing wrong with the area, of course. It was gorgeous in any season. The people tended to be nice. Even so, life had been brutal to her here once upon a time. She wished she didn't have to see her family. Staying in Red Falls with Charlie would be easier, for sure... But Grace was well aware that the easiest road was seldom the right one. She just could not let the rumors about Reece go unaddressed. On a hunch, she went straight to the resort. It had stopped snowing by the time she got there. Acres of precisely landscaped grounds, immaculately covered in the white stuff, unrolled in front of the lake under a dramatic sky. Something Libby would appreciate, no doubt. Grace barely paused to take it all in.

"Hello, Celia."

Inside the office building, the receptionist on duty looked up from doing her nails with a blank, bored expression on her face. Only to blink and visibly shudder at the sight of Grace on the other side of the counter.

"Oh! Ms. Michaels!"

"Busy, busy, I see?" Grace prompted in a chilly tone.

"Uh—"

"Who's in today?"

“Ah, um... Everyone, Ms. Michaels.”

“Great. In this case, I’ll be able to kill several birds with one stone then.”

Celia looked rather unsure and slightly worried at the turn of phrase.

“Well?” Grace prompted.

“Oh, yes. Let me announce you, Ms. Michaels. Your family are all in a meeting.”

Perfect. “Tell you what, I’ll announce myself. Wouldn’t want you to break a nail now, would we?”

“No. I mean, yes, Ms. Michaels...”

The nervous receptionist stared at her like a deer caught in headlights. Grace had to shake her head as she moved on. It was not in her power to fire the woman, but anyone in her office who behaved this way better be prepared for a speedy exit. Of course, no one who worked for her would dare to be so stupid. Grace strode to the conference room, thinking this would be the second time in less than a week that she crashed a private meeting. Might develop a taste for it. Or not, she reflected, as the case may be. Muffled, raised voices could be heard on the other side of the oak wooden doors. Sounded like they were in the middle of an argument. Typical. She sighed, already irritated. As far as Grace was concerned, relying on shouting to make a point was a sign of weakness and mediocrity. The fact that she was related to this lot never ceased to amaze her. Anyway. Let’s do this thing. Eat the frog. All that. She pulled the doors, walked in, and suppressed a wry chuckle when they all turned at once and fell silent at the sight of her.

“Surprise!” she declared, unsmiling.

“Grace!” Chloe exclaimed. “You’re here!”

“Hello, sis. Yes, I am.”

Chloe looked shocked as if they had not already spoken on the phone. And immediately guilty too, despite her black Chanel power suit and killer red lipstick on her lips. Grace gathered from her reaction that she must not have told anyone else about the phone call. Or perhaps only her husband, who flashed her a genuine smile. He seemed relieved and told her so.

“Hello, Grace. It’s good to see you.”

He was definitely the odd one out in the group. He was the only non-Michaels and had a successful career before he got involved in the resort. It showed.

“Likewise, Mark,” she said to him.

The twins both stood on the other side of the table, possibly signifying their position on whatever matter they’d been arguing about. Neither looked especially glad to see her, and this was no surprise.

“Jeremy. Reece.” Grace nodded to each in turn. “How’s it going?”

“What are you doing here?” Jeremy barked in reply.

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“Heard about trouble in paradise, thought I’d come to see if you all needed any help.”

“What trouble?”

“Oh, you know.”

Grace lingered with her eyes fixed pointedly on Reece. He met her gaze but was quick to look away with a mutter.

“Fuck’s sake.”

Grace was actually taken aback at his appearance. It had been a few years since she’d seen her two brothers. Jeremy still looked like the handsome playboy he was, with his sculpted body, sharp Armani suit, and stylish blond hair. But Reece had put on weight. His hair was matted as if he had not washed it in a while, and the bags under his eyes were deep like bruises.

“Have you been drinking?” Grace kept her voice calm and even, but she was not going to pull any punches. “Or something else?”

“None of your fucking business, Grace.”

“What is she doing here?” Jeremy tossed accusingly at his sister since Grace had not answered his question.

“Why are you asking me?” Chloe fired back.

“Guys, please,” Mark started, ever the peacekeeper.

“Why don’t you shut up?” Jeremy hissed at him.

Grace ignored them all as she walked up to Reece. Up close and personal, there was no doubt, and she said it out loud. “You stink of booze.”

“It’s my day off today,” he snarled. “So buzz off.”

“Why are you here if it’s your day off?” She glanced around the room and took in the unhappy faces. “Is this a damage limitation meeting? Have you been suspended, Reece? Or fired?”

“We were discussing how best to mitigate the situation,” Mark offered with a quiet exhale.

Grace caught a hint of obvious frustration in his voice. She knew he carried more than his fair share of the work here, and this sort of thing was not an exciting new project; it was hassle, pure and simple. No wonder he sounded tired. She took another step closer to Reese, causing him to bump the back of his legs against a chair as he moved back. He dropped heavily into it.

“Is it true?” she prompted. “My brother sexually assaulted two women on his staff?”

“Hell no! I didn’t do anything.”

“You sure?”

“Yes! They’re lying. They’re just after money, that’s all.”

“Lay off of him, Grace,” Jeremy warned. “He’s got a lot on his plate.”

“I bet he does. Which came first, though? Attempted rape or a full plate?”

She'd baited him into an unguarded reaction. Reece leaped out of his chair as if it were on fire, and he finally got in her face. “There was no rape. You hear me?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Goddammit! I would never... It was just—”

“Reece!” Jeremy snapped.

“Let him speak,” Grace ordered. “It was just what, Reece?”

“Nothing,” he muttered again, then turned his back as he went to stand in front of the window. “It was nothing.”

Grace stared hard at her other brother. “What do you know, Jeremy?”

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“His lawyers advised him not to talk.”

“I see. And you are his guard dog now?”

“I have my brother’s back, yes.”

“Right. So, you have lawyers. Do you have a good therapist as well?”

“Pfft.” Jerney snorted aggressively. “What the hell for?”

“I’m talking to you, Reece,” Grace said, even as he kept his back to her. God, it was like talking to a sulky child! She went around and forced him to look at her. “You don’t look well.”

“And you look perfect, as usual,” he sneered.

“I’m saying this because I care, okay? Not to fight with you. You should speak to a therapist.”

“No need. I – DID – NOT rape these women, Grace.”

“Okay.” His eyes were flat, his jaw set tight, and she could not read him. It bothered her. Still, he was her brother, and she ached to believe him. Until she heard otherwise, she would give him the benefit of the doubt. “I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Can’t believe you needed to ask,” he grunted.

She let that one go and spoke to him in a softer tone. In the past, they'd always been close. "Look, brother, I think you should see a—"

"Who asked you for your advice?" Jeremy cut in again.

She glanced at him, irritated. "I'm just trying to help here, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. We don't need your help. We don't need you here, period."

Of the two boys, Jeremy had always been harder to connect to. He was colder and more calculating. He used to always stand on the side of their father, and Grace knew this was not likely to change.

"I was talking to Reece," she reminded him.

"Yeah, and I am talking to you, sister." The word sounded harsh and mocking on his lips. "No one in this room cares what you think. In case you didn't get the memo, you're no longer a part of this family."

"Jeremy. That's enough," Chloe said in a warning tone.

He ignored her. "We don't want you sticking your nose into our affairs, business or personal."

"You talk to me with such animosity." Grace kept her tone light even as she remarked on it. "Why are you so furious with me, I wonder?" She certainly did take note.

"I absolutely do not trust you, Grace," he snarled in reply. "Not since you showed such contempt for us, and Mom and Dad, in the first place."

She would not, could not, leave this unchallenged.

“No contempt. I was cut loose and told to leave.”

“As I’m telling you now. You have no part to play here.”

Well, this was going nowhere. And fast getting boring too. She shrugged.

“Don’t worry; I’m not interested in your private affairs or in stealing the family business. I’ve got plenty of my own to keep me busy and entertained.” This got his back up even more, she could see. Of course, any reminder of her success was likely to. It made her laugh, though it was bitter for her. “What, Jeremy? Are you jealous?”

“Fuck, no,” he spat, but a little too quickly.

“Really?” She quirked a teasing eyebrow. “You seem pretty bothered for a guy who claims not to care.”

“At least you got that right, I don’t give a shit. So, thanks for checking in, but now you can leave. We look after our own here. Protect our people.” His eyes steadied on her face, ice cold and taunting. “If I remember correctly, that’s not something you are very good at yourself.”

chapter 9

The comment hit a raw nerve and also properly stole her breath. Grace heard Chloe gasp, and even Reece turned to frown at his brother in obvious condemnation. She managed not to react, at least outwardly, and give Jeremy that satisfaction. She could see he was looking for one, studying her. You fucking bastard. Grief and sadness surged. She hid it well, but she felt sick.

“Grace? Let’s go to my office,” Mark invited wisely.

Not trusting her voice, she nodded and followed him. Once there were only three of them, Chloe felt obliged to pull her into a hug. It was predictably awkward.

“I’m sorry, Grace. That was a low blow even for him.”

“Yeah.” It was nasty and cruel, designed to make her bleed. Grace did not point it out; it was enough for her to know. “What pissed him off so bad? And why didn’t you tell me about Reece when you called me the other day?”

“Well...” Chloe squirmed, and she cast her husband a quick glance for help.

“Chloe,” Grace simmered. “I’m asking you.”

“Oh, gosh. I was just—” Her sister threw both hands in the air in frustration. “Look, he didn’t want me to, okay? You know, it’s his private stuff.”

“Private stuff. Family business. None of mine. Yeah, got the message.”

“Grace, you know I’m not saying you wouldn’t care, but—”

“I do care,” she interrupted. “A lot. So, what’s wrong with Reece? He looks like he’s been on a bender for weeks on end.”

“He’s been drinking a lot, yes.”

“Since the accusations?”

“No, since the woman he asked to marry him turned him down and left the country.”

“Wow.” Frowning, Grace considered. “Seems a bit extreme, leaving the country in reaction to a marriage proposal.”

Mark chuckled. “Well, she was Russian to begin with.”

“An ice skater, former Olympian. Gorgeous,” Chloe added. “They’d been dating for about six months when he proposed. She said no and flew back to Moscow like she always planned to do.”

“He didn’t know?”

“Sure did.” Mark put in. “But Reece was in denial. He was convinced she’d stay if he proposed.”

“Like God’s gift to women.” Grace was not unkind in her assessment.

“Something like that. When she said no, he was devastated. He’s been going downhill ever since.”

“You think he did what these women accuse him of?”

“To be honest, Grace, I don’t know. I don’t want to believe he’s capable of it, but two women came forward, and I wouldn’t think they’re the type to make up stuff. If he’d been drinking...” Mark shrugged in reluctance. “Who knows?”

He exchanged a loaded glance with his wife. Some silent communication passed between them. Oh, man. Now what?

“Tell me,” Grace demanded. “What else is there?”

???

Olivia did not often hold clients’ meetings in hotel bars, but she had made an exception for this one since the man was only in town for a couple of days. They had a drink and a nice chat, over which he enthusiastically outlined his plans for what he called a ‘Forest Wet Room’ in his Burlington lake house. The natural world should inspire every piece of furniture in the new bathroom.

“I want a vanity counter fashioned out of a slab to make it look like a polished tree trunk, rustic oak cabinets, and a mirror encased in sturdy roots. Then I’ll add lots of plants to the space.” He grinned at her over his pint of beer. “Like I imagine it would be inside a hobbit house.”

“Ah,” she chuckled. “You’re a Tolkien fan?”

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“Yeah, big time. You?”

“Yes, me too.”

“Great. So that’s the vibe I’m looking for. Could you do it?”

“Absolutely, sounds like a fun challenge. I’ll have a think over the weekend and send you drawings to look at by Monday at the latest.”

“Perfect! Thanks, Olivia, I appreciate it.”

Olivia was ready to leave when she spotted Grace Michaels coming in. She froze instantly and lingered as she watched her make her way to the bar. What is she doing here alone? Grace had looked exceedingly attractive the other day in her expensive, no doubt made-to-order, outfit. Now she was equally arresting in tight-fitting blue jeans, black heels, and a white linen shirt half-tucked in on one side. Stylish and relaxed in equal measures. Olivia bit on her lip as Grace found a stool and ordered a drink. She’d been excited to go home and start on her new project. Maybe with a hot chocolate and Lord of the Rings on screen for inspiration. Little Everett on the sofa next to her. Now she was tempted to go over and at least say hello. Hopefully, a bit more. She watched Grace run a single hand through her hair, then let out a heavy exhale as if she had a lot on her mind. Olivia found her own legs propelling her forward before her mind had time to decide if it was really a good idea.

“Good evening, Ms. Michaels.”

Grace glanced aside with an eyebrow already half-cocked in dismissal, from which

Olivia deduced she must not be in a mood to chat. She pretended not to notice that and remained standing with a smile firmly on her face.

“May I join you?”

Crystal-blue eyes performed their usual assessment. Top to bottom and up again, razor-sharp, before Grace nodded vaguely in reply.

“May as well.” Warm and inviting, she definitely was not, but it did not stop Olivia from being attracted to her like a hungry bee to a fragrant flower. “Though I did not take you for the bar type, Ms. Bianchi.”

“I had a meeting with a potential new client here tonight. And it’s Olivia.”

“Ah.” Grace merely glanced at the bartender, which was all it took to bring him back from the other end of the bar, where he was talking to someone else. Talk about a magnetic personality. “What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have the same as you.” This meant expensive whisky, neat, in a tumbler engraved with the head of a stag and a pewter bottom. Classy...It fit the woman. Olivia slid on the nearest stool. “Thanks. I do go out from time to time, you know.”

“Hmm-mm.” Grace flashed an enigmatic, almost lazy half-smile. “I’m sure you do.”

Olivia observed the way she held her glass and swirled the gold amber liquid inside it—casual and precise at the same time. She noted red-painted nails—long, elegant fingers. Everything about the way this woman moved was graceful and effortless. If Olivia were not careful, the whole thing might even strike her as erotic.

“I didn’t take you for the drinking alone type,” she stated to take her mind off things.

“Maybe I’m waiting on a date.”

“Oh...” Disappointment flared, which Olivia did her best to hide. “Are you?”

“As it happens, not tonight. But what am I supposed to do? Call a friend every time I want a drink?”

Not tonight? Olivia wondered privately.

“Good point,” she granted. “I just thought you were staying at Charlie’s.”

Grace flicked her a wry glance. “And didn’t I tell you not to assume things about me?”

“Certainly. But didn’t you also assume that I wasn’t the bar type? And got it wrong? You’re not following your own advice.”

Olivia teased, even as she stood her ground, which earned her an appreciative smirk. Just like the whisky, it warmed her up from the inside out.

“Touché,” Grace conceded and offered that she was staying at the hotel. “It’s easier that way for both of us. I had dinner with Charlie at the house, then sent her to bed nice and early. She needs the rest.”

“And she listened to you?”

“Of course.”

“I guess people do, huh?” Olivia grinned, entertained at the unapologetic smugness of her tone.

“Yeah.” Grace shrugged as a fleeting shadow passed across her face. “Most of the time, anyway, if they know what’s good for them.”

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She seemed preoccupied, slightly irritated. Olivia wondered if she might have been catching up on the latest family scandal. It would put anyone in a bad mood. She decided not to ask.

“I’m glad you listened to me this time,” she told her with a smile instead.

“How do you figure that?”

“We’re having this drink. Dinner next time. At my house. Yes?”

Grace’s eyes narrowed again slightly in that feline way she had of studying her. It sent a lovely tingle sizzling down Olivia’s spine. She suppressed a shiver.

“Didn’t we have this conversation the other day?” Grace prompted in a voice as silky-smooth as the whisky.

“Yes, but I’m still waiting for you to agree.”

“I told you no.”

“See?” Olivia grinned. “My point exactly.”

As she clinked her tumbler softly against hers for effect, she wondered if Grace could sense how nervous she actually was, flirting with her like this. Olivia surprised herself by doing it. The whole thing with Beth had shot her confidence and left her reeling for way too long. But now something about Grace Michaels, for all her rude glances and apparent dismissiveness, made her feel more alive than she had since the

breakup. It felt pretty amazing to want to be playful again with another woman. And bold. Even better was the realization that Grace seemed to enjoy this sort of thing.

“Humor and perseverance are two qualities I appreciate in a woman,” she declared.

“Good for me, then,” Olivia winked.

With what definitely looked like an approving smile, Grace raised two fingers at the bartender, signaling for another round. Olivia was already getting a nice buzz from the quality whisky, but she was not about to stop when the woman showed signs of wanting to pursue the conversation. She just resolved to go slow and be careful.

“What is it you do again? Charlie said you’re an artist.”

“I design nature-inspired furniture using woods like oak or birch. And more artful pieces as well, yes.”

“May I see?”

“Uh... Sure.” Olivia pulled out her phone.

She planned to hold it, as one does, while she showed a few photos of the work she kept on there for just this kind of request. But Grace took the phone from her with no hesitation. And she was both silent and extremely thorough as she flicked through the shots. As a professional artist, Olivia was used to this kind of scrutiny, of course. But because it was Grace, she could not help but be a little nervous again. Not only did she want her to appreciate her work on a personal level, but she knew Grace would be able to assess it on a professional one as well. She knew her stuff and was one of the most influential players in the industry. Not just anyone ended up on the cover of Time Magazine, did they? So, the pressure was on to make a good impression. Forgetting her resolve, Olivia gulped more whisky as Grace used two fingers to zoom

in on a specific piece. She did it again on the next photo. Thankfully, when her verdict was delivered, it was positive.

“These are good, Olivia.”

“Thanks.”

Grace held her gaze intently. “I mean, this is excellent work. You are obviously very talented.”

“Thank you. It means a lot coming from you.”

“Yes.” Grace nodded matter-of-factly, demonstrating once more that she certainly did not suffer from any lack of self-confidence. “How come I’d never heard of your work before?”

“Ah... Perhaps because you favor different styles?”

“Not likely.”

“If you say so.” Olivia chuckled. “I don’t know then. Maybe you need to broaden your horizons.”

Grace eyed her like a challenge. “You have a website?”

“Of course.”

“Show it to me.”

Olivia brought it up dutifully. Again, her phone was swiftly snatched. Feedback was quicker than before and a lot less enthusiastic.

“Takes a long time to load, doesn’t it?”

“Oh? That’s news to me.”

“Where’s your gallery?”

“It’s on the menu, right under—”

“Ah, yes. Just a few too many clicks to get to it. Mmm.”

“What?” Olivia asked when the woman winced and shook her head at the same time.

“What’s wrong with my gallery?”

“Again, it’s slow. You’ve got too much content on there. It’s just... Well, clunky. Far from the best website I’ve ever seen, you know?”

chapter 10

Really? Olivia was not so sure how to take all this. What did she mean, too much content? Wasn’t a gallery supposed to showcase her work? Dammit! She was actually very proud of her website. She’d done her research on which platform to use, slaved over the layout of the gallery, learned all about SEO, and carefully selected each photo...

“You did not include the shots from your phone that you just showed me,” Grace stated as if she could read her mind. “I wonder why?”

“Well, these are more recent pieces, so I was—”

“Ah!” Not even bothering with the answer to her question, Grace made a face as she scrolled to the bottom of the welcome page, presumably to emphasize the fact that it took a long time. Then she fixed her with laughing eyes. “Squarespace, uh?”

“Yes?” Olivia prompted, irritated now.

“Don’t tell me you designed your own website?”

“I certainly did. I take it you disapprove?”

“I certainly do not.” Grace agreed, looking amused.

As she crossed a slender leg, getting more comfortable, her foot brushed against the side of Olivia’s shin. On purpose? Hard to tell, and it only added to her fluster.

“Tell me why you don’t approve,” she pushed.

“It’s not efficient. Surely you can afford a professional to do this kind of thing for you?”

“Yes... But why would I hire someone else to do something I can?”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should. That’s why you don’t cut your own hair and go to a professional instead of—” Grace stopped abruptly as her eyes drifted, indeed, to her hair. Biting on her lip, she clearly suppressed a smile. “Oh, okay. You do cut your own hair.”

“No, actually. Anyway. Are you always so judgmental and rude?”

“Have I offended you?” Grace laid her fingers on her arm, eliciting another involuntary shiver. “Sorry, Olivia. Didn’t mean to.”

This must be true, though her tantalizing smirk indicated she wasn’t that sorry. This was a game. Olivia suspected she was being teased and tested. The realization that she was enjoying it was quite startling.

“It takes more than a remark about my hair to offend me,” she stated, hoping that she was not blushing too hard. “This being said, you are pretty effortlessly insulting.”

“So I’m told.” Grace shrugged. “I guess it just depends on how open you are to receiving helpful feedback. From what little I’ve seen of it, your work deserves better than a half-assed website job.”

“I worked hard to create that site.”

“That’s why I don’t fix my own toilet.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Grace chuckled. “Still on the same theme, darling. Meaning I know where my skills lie, and I focus on that. All the rest of it, I am happy to delegate. Why would you waste your valuable time and innate talent sweating on something that you can easily pass on to an expert? Someone who’ll do it better, quicker, and more successfully?”

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She sounded genuinely interested and slightly impatient as well. She made a good point too. Though Olivia would rather go running naked in the snow outside than admit it to the woman, who clearly did not require more vindication of her own worth, she was keenly aware that her arrogance and general bluntness were a fabulous turn-on.

“When it comes to my business, I like to handle everything myself,” she offered.

“Ah...” Grace squeezed her fingers and briefly rubbed her thumb over the back of her hand before letting go. “Spoken like a true control freak.”

“I am absolutely not a control freak.” Olivia’s protest came out a little weaker than she would have liked on account of that lingering touch.

“You may balk at the idea, but what else do you call this?”

“Simply being resourceful and resilient.”

“Do you? How about stubborn?”

“Speak for yourself, your Highness.”

Grace threw her head back and laughed, exposing the long, delicate column of her throat and making Olivia want to stare. Or kiss her there. Yes... Definitely kiss her.

“You’re not the first one to call me that, Olivia.”

“No kidding?” It was Olivia’s turn to smirk ironically.

“None whatsoever. All I’m saying is that your DIY website may not be helping much with your overall reach.”

“Not likely.” Olivia used her own words from before. “And as you said, you’re not an expert in that area.”

“Alright. Fair enough.”

“So...”

“So.” Grace leaned toward her with a knowing smile, also amused and sexy at the same time. “Thank you for a lively chat, but it’s time.”

“Time?”

“To call it a night. I want to check my emails before bed, and I have an early appointment tomorrow.”

It was already ten o’clock...Wow.

“Of course.” Olivia followed as Grace stood up. “Thank you as well. I didn’t realize it was this late.”

“Time flies when in good company.”

Had Grace just told her she was good company? Or was she talking about herself again? Olivia thought definitely the former, this time.

“Yes,” she smiled. “I really...—”

What happened next took her entirely by surprise. She lost her words and swayed with a rushing wave of light-headedness. Before she could react and get herself under control, everything went black. The next thing she was aware of was something soft but firm brushing against her cheek. She caught a whiff of heady but also strangely calming perfume. Amber and sandalwood? One hundred percent feminine. Olivia thought herself immune to any but the scent of fresh, strong pine. She must have been wrong, obviously. This perfume went straight to her head in a good way. She felt instantly safe and protected.

“Olivia.” A low and silky voice called to her.

When she opened her eyes, she was initially aware of only some shimmering shades of turquoise blue. As she blinked, her world suddenly righted itself, and she realized that she was gazing straight into Grace Michaels's eyes.

“Are you okay?” the woman asked.

“Uh... Yeah...?”

Olivia took stock of the situation. She had dropped back on her stool, and now Grace was standing very close, with one arm securely wrapped around her shoulders. She felt a lot stronger than she looked. Olivia could tell since she was pressed tightly against her side, basically in her arms. What happened? The wall clock only read 22:01, so, hopefully, nothing too embarrassing. The something soft but firm against her cheek turned out to be Grace's right breast under a layer of her shirt. No bra? Olivia was pretty sure. She swallowed and drifted a bit more with that image.

“Hey.” Grace snapped her fingers in front of her eyes, her tone in sharp contrast with the gentleness of her embrace. “Stay with me.”

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“Okay.” Still dazed, Olivia smiled. “I’d love to.”

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Grace watched it happen. As Olivia stood up, every bit of color drained from her face. Her large, expressive, dark eyes emptied and glazed over. It was frighteningly quick, and no doubt she would have dropped if Grace had not been there to catch her. Now the woman was staring at her with that goofy, horny, and frankly, hugely attractive smile on her lips. Grace resisted the urge to hug her. What was up with that anyway? She clasped her chin instead and ignored the dreamy look in her eyes.

“What happened, Olivia?”

“I went dizzy.”

“I saw that. What did you have for dinner?”

“Dinner? Ah... I didn’t have time for it.”

“No wonder you’re not well. Good thing I was with you, or you’d have smashed your forehead on the marble floor. Yeah,” Grace nodded when she saw her wince. “Not a nice thought.”

“Thanks for catching me.”

“You’re welcome.” Grace also had to bite her tongue, not to mention that it had been a pleasure.

“I’ll have some food when I get home.”

“You’re not driving home before you have food. Actually, you’re not driving, period.”

“I meant I’ll take an Uber. Uh... Where’s my phone?”

Grace noticed a slight tremor in her fingers as she passed it to Olivia. Olivia was still as white as a sheet, and a thin layer of sweat glistened on her forehead. This looked like a typical low-blood-sugar event prompted by a lack of food, a couple of strong drinks, and perhaps stimulating conversation as well. So...

“No,” she decided.

“No?” Olivia repeated, looking confused.

“You’re not taking an Uber home at this time of night when you’re not feeling a hundred percent.”

“But—”

“No, but. Come with me.” Grace pulled her to her feet and kept a steadying arm around her waist as she led her toward the elevators.

“Where are we going?”

“My room.”

“Oh?” Olivia’s hopeful glance was endearing. Grace had to laugh, though it made her blood quicken as well. “Not for some wild sex, Ms. Bianchi. You are in urgent need of sustenance. And then you’ll rest. My suite is plenty big enough for the two of us

tonight.”

“Well,” Olivia grumbled. “I’m not sure I want to do that.”

Grace moved in front of her to hit the top floor button on the elevator panel. She turned back to see Olivia grab hold of the brass railing for balance.

“Tough,” she shrugged. “That’s what you’ll do.”

“This feels like an abduction.”

“Feel free to experience it any way you like.”

“Man!” Olivia half-laughed and half-groaned. “Who’s the control freak now, eh?”

Of course, there was a reason for it, and it was still painful. Grace knew Charlie would not have said anything to her young friend. She also decided not to share her personal business. But the memories were especially vivid tonight. Being in Red Falls, with this dark-eyed woman... Grace chased tragic pictures out of her mind. This was here, now.Focus.

“They have chips and vegan burgers on room service here. In case this might make your kidnapping a bit more enjoyable for you.”

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Olivia did lick her top lip at the news. “You know just how to talk to a girl, huh?”

“Practice makes perfect. I’ve had lots of it.”

“I like you, Grace.” Now she wobbled with a weak chuckle.

“Of course you do.”

“I find you arrogant, irritating, and stubborn.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you are also gentle and caring. I think you try to hide your softer side. It’s not working. I can see right through you.”

“Instead of giving me the shrink treatment, see if you can walk in a straight line.”

Grace guided Olivia to her door with a strong grip around her arm when she struggled. Then across the main room, straight to the sofa. “Sit. Don’t pass out on me, okay?”

“Kay.” Olivia exhaled. “Ah... I’m sorry about this.”

“No need. Just don’t faint. Olivia...” Grace held her steady as she started to pitch to the side, probably to do just that. “Eat first, sleep later.”

“Wild sex? When?”

“Not on the menu.”

The promised burger, an extra-large portion of chips, and a plant-based strawberry milkshake were delivered a few minutes later.

“Jesus,” Olivia muttered, reaching for the drink with shaky hands. She had to use both so as not to spill it. “Is this getting worse?”

“You’ll feel better as soon as the food hits your system. This never happened to you before?”

“No. Why? Is it a thing?”

“You just went hypo-glycemic. It happened to me a few times in my previous career. I was a professional dancer,” Grace added at Olivia’s prompting look.

“Oh, that explains it then.”

“What?”

“The graceful way you move.” Olivia smiled at her around a mouthful of burger. “And underlying strength. You felt strong when you were holding me. Were you a ballet dancer?”

“At first, yes. Then I specialized in social Latin styles.”

“Like Salsa? One of my exes was really into that.”

“One of them?” Grace prompted, surprised to feel a flash of irritation at the thought of even a single one. “How many of them might there be?”

Olivia fixed her with suddenly rosy cheeks and a sheepish smile. “That didn’t come out right. Not many exes. I don’t date a lot.”

Grace spotted a telling flicker across her eyes as she said this. Hurt? Grief? Both, she suspected. And again, this triggered a powerful impulse to soothe and protect. Grace was well aware of this trait of character in herself. She invariably assumed the role of protector in her relationships. This being said it was a long time since she had felt the urge so strongly. There was also the fact that this woman was absolutely not her type... Right?

“Do you still dance?” Olivia asked.

“Now and then. Only for fun and pleasure.” As her phone rang, Grace seized on a timely excuse to end the conversation. “Enjoy your meal, Ms. Bianchi. And yell if you need anything. Goodnight.”

chapter 11

Olivia was helping to run a vegan awareness event the following day. It was straightforward street activism, unscripted. The kind she enjoyed most was when members of the public were invited to debate a hot issue. On that day, the vegan advocates stood in front of a sign including a photo of a cute newborn calf, and a caption asking:

‘Is your pleasure worth my life?’

They argued that fleeting pleasure derived from the taste of a regular burger, for example, was not worth the precious life of the animal that was slaughtered to provide the meat. Asking for people’s views and opinions on similar topics often turned into fruitful exchanges. It allowed animal rights advocates to debunk myths about the fact that slaughter was humane: how could any kind of killing be humane? And correct any preconceived ideas about nutrition and health that stopped people from adopting a more plant-based lifestyle, such as the protein issue. Hopefully, sharing science and facts all contributed to opening people’s minds to a different way of thinking and planted seeds for future change as well. Dana joined the group for a couple of hours at lunchtime, after which Olivia offered to drive her back to her practice.

“You should have seen Cash last night,” her friend said, referring to her older German Shepherd. “He wasn’t sure about your little guy at first, but Everett chased him all over the house, wanting to play. In the end, they had a brilliant time.”

“I’m glad they got on,” Olivia approved. “Thanks for babysitting Everett overnight for me.”

“No problem. So what happened exactly?” Dana prompted. “It’s not like you to get drunk and have to spend the night at a hotel.”

“It was definitely an accident. I had a beer with a client, just to be polite, as we discussed his requirements for a new project. Then I bumped into Charlie’s niece.”

“The famous Grace Michaels.”

“Yes. I shared another couple of drinks with her; she likes whisky, the expensive kind.”

“Huh! Nice.”

“Definitely. Because I’d skipped dinner, I got a bit dizzy as I stood up to leave. She wouldn’t hear of me catching a taxi home and made me stay the night.”

“Made you, eh?” Dana queried. “Strange way to put it, but okay…”

“Well.” Olivia shrugged, fighting a blush. She wasn’t about to confess how much she’d enjoyed Grace Michaels in full take-charge mode, telling her what to do. And just opted for another word to satisfy Dana. “Grace insisted.”

“Grace. Right. And she fed you vegan burgers and chips.”

“Yes.”

“How wonderful.”

“It was really kind of her, for sure.”

Dana fixed her with glinting eyes. “And?”

“And what?”

“What happened after that?”

“Nothing. I ate and went to bed. On my own,” Olivia added when she noticed the

widening grin on Dana's face. "Her suite at the Forester is big enough for a family of six. And it wasn't about that."

"But you are attracted to her."

Olivia kept her gaze firmly fixed on the road. "What makes you think so?"

"Oh, let's see... Could be the wistful tone of your voice or that little smile on your lips." Dana chuckled. "Your eyes are all shiny."

"Oh, gosh." Olivia groaned.

"Plus, I know you, babe, and how stubborn you can be."

"Hey..."

"It's true. If you'd really wanted to go home last night, no woman's 'insistence', as you say, would have kept you there."

"I guess not," Olivia conceded.

"So there must be more to the story. I like her for not letting you leave in an Uber late at night when you were not feeling too well."

"That's pretty much what she said."

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“Be careful, though, Oli. She has a bit of a reputation.”

“Does she?” Olivia grinned. “She said no to a round of wild sex, so maybe not as much as you think.”

“What?” Dana shrieked. “You offered?”

“No, it just came up in the conversation. She brought it up first.”

“Meaning you also did... Later on?”

“I might have. But then she said only vegan burger was on the menu.” Olivia was amused as she glanced over and noticed her friend’s bewildered expression. “Close your mouth.”

“Roger that. But wow, Olivia...” Dana shook her head, still looking amazed. “What kind of conversation were you having over that expensive whisky that the idea of wild sex got into it?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Oh, come on!”

“No, really. I did invite her home for dinner, but she hasn’t said yes,yet. I think I was teasing her about that, and it all went from there.”

“I guess you got your mojo back, uh?”

“It felt good to flirt with a woman like her.”

“Okay, now I’m worried,” Dana said after a brief moment of silence.

“Why?”

“Because again, I know you, Oli. I know you don’t just flirt. It’s more akin to a skydiving exercise with you.”

“I’m not falling for her, Dana, if this is what you mean. And anyway, I thought you said I should get back in the saddle and all that?”

“Yes, but not with Grace Michaels.”

“Two seconds ago, you told me you liked her.”

“I like what she did for you. But when I said she has a bit of a reputation, I meant as something else. She’s pretty heartless when it comes to business, apparently. They say she can be a real bitch when it—”

“Okay, stop right there, please,” Olivia interrupted. “Look, D., I know you mean well, but I’m not interested in rumors and negative gossip. She’s whip-smart, ambitious, and a real type-A personality. We both know what some people call a woman like that.”

“A heartless bitch,” Dana chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t judge based on hearsay.”

“Absolutely. From seeing her interacting with Charlie and spending a bit of time with her one-to-one, I can tell you there’s a lot going on with her under the surface that I’m sure not many people ever get to see.”

Dana laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, prompting Olivia to glance at her again. “You’re already seriously into her, aren’t you?”

“Well... A bit.”

“You’d like to be the one to get under her skin.”

“I’d like to know her. Yes...” Olivia breathed in deeply as she recalled Grace’s often short and sharp answers, the commanding way she had to address everyone, and her undisputed authority. She understood why people might refer to her as rude, cold, and even heartless. If they could see the hidden warmth behind her smile and feel the softness of her touch, they would change their mind pretty quickly. “The woman is sexy as sin,” she murmured as if to herself.

“Oh, dear. Oli!”

“Really, she’s gorgeous. And yes, her emotional armor feels like it’s three inches thick.” Olivia smiled at her friend. “But it only makes her more alluring as far as I’m concerned.”

Dana rolled her eyes in a mix of amused, exasperated, and concerned. “Of course it does. You have a thing for women who look strong but are often emotionally damaged on the inside.”

“That’s not true,” Olivia protested. “I like them strong, and often this means battle-hardened. It’s very different from being damaged.”

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“Yeah, yeah. How does she feel about you?”

“She says I’m not her type.”

“What’s wrong with her? Doesn’t like young, attractive, talented artists with a heart of gold?”

“A baby butch dyke is what she called me.”

“Again, what’s not to like? Anyway, I’d advise you to stay well away from her because the woman sounds like trouble, but I guess from the look on your face, the advice would fall on deaf ears.”

“Yep. Though I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Good luck thawing her up; sounds like you’ll need it. And please, Olivia, whatever you do, be careful, okay?”

“No skydiving, I promise,” Olivia grinned.

“Too right. I’m all for you having fun, babe, but don’t you go in too deep and let the woman hurt you. Or I’ll have to hurt her worse.”

???

Grace wondered how long her siblings had managed to keep the resort going when they were so damn divided. Chloe and Mark had made her aware that the twins were

playing dirty in order to become joint CEOs. Reece and Jeremy wanted their sister out of the game. She and her husband were after the same thing for them. And Chloe had come up with a startling solution.

“Come onboard with Mark and I, Grace. The three of us can take over and inject new life into the business!”

No doubt the resort needed an injection of... something, Grace decided as she went on a thorough inspection walk of the place. The stale and outdated décor in the hotel, in particular, made her stare and shake her head in distaste. Since when had they bothered to update or renovate anything in there? Match that with a bunch of bored and distrustful employees, and the business might not keep its reputation for luxurious excellence very long. Even without a juicy sex scandal to hasten its demise.

“Would you consider teaming up with Chloe and Mark?” Charlie inquired that night over a shared dinner at her house.

“Hell, no. Never in a million years.”

“Ah... Right. I didn’t think you would.”

“And you know why,” Grace stated.

“Yes, darling,” Charlie answered softly. “Certainly.”

“Plus, it’s a stupid idea. They shouldn’t be working against each other like this. Just goes to show once more that family and business don’t mix so well, eh?”

“Sadly, you’re right.”

“Also, the day-to-day running of the resort may represent a challenge for them, but I

can't think of anything more boring to be involved in." Grace shrugged as she noticed her aunt's quick smile. "Sorry to sound arrogant, but it's true."

Charlie reached across the table to pat her on the arm.

"Don't apologize. You know I get a kick out of your energy, and I much prefer blunt honesty to sneaky power games. You are always such a breath of fresh air, darling."

"Chloe did realize that about the resort, at least. It needs an urgent refresh. Looks and management included."

"Any suggestions?"

"Oh, plenty." Grace winked, making her aunt chuckle. "So I made her an offer. A complete redesign package, the same sort of thing I'm going to do for the Excelsior chain, but specific to the resort. Because of the circumstances, I also plan to assign a select leadership team to the business to help right up the ship, so to speak. And to mentor them."

"What did Chloe say to that?"

"Damn well had herself a heart attack at the audacity."

Now Charlie burst out laughing. It was good to see healthy color back in her face and the usual lively glint in her eyes.

"I can imagine how your sister might feel insulted by this sort of counter-offer. She won't take kindly to being told what to do by outsiders."

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“Well, Mark seemed keen on the idea. If she’s smart, Chloe will take the offer.”

“Then, she probably will.”

“She’ll have to convince the twins, of course.” Grace could not suppress a groan at the thought of how hard this would be. “Reece really should step down, you know?”

That tense and worried look flew back over Charlie’s face. “Has he spoken to you about the situation? Will you?”

“Not yet. He’s been avoiding me.”

“Oh, Grace...”

“I’ll keep at it, Charlie, I promise. In the meantime, try not to worry too much.”

Despite her loaded family history, Grace would never turn a blind eye when her brother was in trouble. Reece might be too proud to want to accept help... But after receiving confirmation from Charlie’s cardiologist that a spike in stress levels must be to blame for her recent heart issue, Grace was even more motivated to succeed, for both their sake. Then, Charlie hit her with a bit more sensitive stuff.

“Have you heard from your dad?”

“Gosh... No. Next topic.”

“Indulge me, please, darling.”

“It’s been five years since our last brief conversation at my mother’s funeral. And it wasn’t a friendly one. I’m not interested in talking to him, and he’s not likely to reach out to me anytime soon.” A loaded silence ensued as if Charlie may disagree with the statement, prompting Grace to eye her intently. “What is it?” “More bad news?” “Tell me.”

chapter 12

Grace searched inside herself for any hint of emotion at the news that her father had been diagnosed with stomach cancer a month earlier. She was not too surprised not to find any.

“No one knows yet,” Charlie hurried to tell her. “Luckily, the doctors found it early, and he’s responding well to treatment he’s having at a clinic in New York.”

“That’s good.” Still, zero feeling.

“He asked me not to tell anyone. Chloe and the twins don’t know either. Okay?”

“Right.” Meaning she had to keep it to herself. Grace let out a sigh of frustration. “Why does everything always have to be so damn secretive in this family?”

“I struggle with it too, darling.” The strain showed on Charlie’s face. “Your father doesn’t like to show weakness, I suppose. He’s hoping to get better first, then he’ll tell everyone.”

Despite herself, Grace could relate to this way of wanting to deal with the situation. She knew she must owe her lone wolf character to her father’s genes. What had happened in her teens probably just cemented the whole thing for her.

“Now it makes more sense,” she grumbled.

“What does?”

“Your health issue. You must be stressed out of your mind, worrying about everybody else and their secrets.”

“I’m sorry to unload onto you. I know it’s not fair—”

“Don’t even think that,” Grace interrupted. “Of course, you can unload onto me. Anything, anytime. I’m so grateful for you, Charlie. I swear, the rest of this family are all mad!”

With a chuckle, Charlie stepped forward to embrace her. “I feel even better for your magnificent assessment.”

“I hope that’s true.”

“Totally. But you know, crazy or not, I still wish we could spend Christmas together this year as a family. It’s probably silly to keep hoping that John will reach out to you someday and apologize, but...”

“Are you saying I should make the first move and contact my father?” Grace prompted when she stopped.

“No, honey.” Charlie was firm. “I would never ask that of you. What he did was wrong. And cruel. I wish things could be different, that’s all.”

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Olivia stood in the corner of the big event room, waiting to see if Grace Michaels would make an appearance. The Red Falls and Burlington annual business awards ceremony must be pitiful change compared to the sort she was used to. Still, it mattered to the community, and every local company was represented here tonight. Olivia had spotted Jeremy Michaels, his sister, and her husband wandering around earlier. There was no sign of the other twin, Reece, which was probably a smart move. And...

“Oli!” Olivia turned to see Charlie aiming for her with open arms and a beaming smile. “Congratulations, my darling!”

“Ah, thanks.” Olivia hugged her back, and she laughed. “To be fair, I’m the only wood-sculpting artist based in Red Falls. So, you know...”

“Doesn’t matter,” Charlie stated. “You still won.”

“I sure did. Hey, it’s good to see you. I thought you might not make it tonight.”

“I haven’t missed this event in fifteen years. It’s so fun and exciting! You know I belong to several of the town’s volunteer groups, don’t you?”

“Yes. You guys also received a commendation tonight.”

“That’s right!” Charlie nodded proudly.

“It’s great. Congratulations to you as well.”

“Thank you, my darling. Plus, I am fully recovered.”

“You do look fit and healthy again.” Olivia could not help glancing behind her, and be disappointed that Charlie seemed to be on her own.

“Are you Looking for someone?” her friend prompted with a softly knowing smile. She pointed to the side doors. She went out for a bit of fresh air.”

It briefly occurred to Olivia to ask who ‘She’ might be, but the amused glint in Charlie’s eyes told her it was already too late to play innocent. I am being as subtle as a bull in a china shop here...So, next, she found herself more or less asking for permission.

“Do you mind if I, uh...”

“You go, darling. My Grace will be glad to see you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Olivia raised her eyebrows in anticipation and a touch of wonder. She also noted the affectionate way Charlie referred to her niece. ‘My Grace’. It was sweet.

“Take the woman a drink,” Charlie advised. “Make it a stiff one.” She blew her a kiss on this puzzling comment and floated back to her mingling. “Oh, hello, sweetie! How are you?”

She was obviously one of the most popular residents of Red Falls. Olivia sneaked away unnoticed. She stopped at the bar to order a whisky, double, neat. And a regular one for herself, not as strong and with added ice. Then she made her way to one of the balconies off the busy function room. The woman she was after stood on her own

at the far end. Olivia took a moment to observe her. This evening, Grace wore a black pinstriped suit tailored to her slender curves and burgundy heels, which perfectly suited her overall vibe. The effect was one of elegance, affluence, and control. However, the latter came slightly more into question when Olivia realized how tightly she was holding onto the metallic railing. And the hard set of her jaw. Grace seemed a little out of breath, too.

“Ms. Mich... Grace?” Olivia spoke softly as she stepped out of a pool of shadow and toward her. There was a brief moment, as Grace whipped her head around, in which Olivia spotted raw emotion in her fierce blue eyes, and a look of almost pain across her face. “Hey,” she started in alarm. “Are you okay?”

Grace recovered her composure so quickly that it was as if the moment had never happened. But her knuckles, white from her death grip on the railing, still gave her away. Catching Olivia looking, she shoved her hands in her suit pockets and shot her a frosty stare.

“Ms. Bianchi.” The greeting came out a little husky. And, in true character, she also ignored the question. “Congrats on your award.”

“Thanks. Charlie told me I’d find you out here. You must be freezing.”

“It’s okay.” The woman answered with a stubborn shrug as if conceding that thirty-three degrees was cold might be a sign of intolerable weakness.

“Are you alright?” Olivia insisted.

“Sure. Fine.” She sounded impatient and irritated. And at first, it looked like she may leave it at that. Then, surprisingly, she added, “A lot of people here tonight I used to know when I lived in Red Falls.”

Olivia gathered it was not a pleasant thing for her.

“A blast from the past...” She nodded in sympathy. “These aren’t always fun.”

“Never for me.” Grace exhaled, seeming to relax a bit more at this shared understanding. “You got us drinks.”

“Yes.”

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Olivia handed her the stiff double and a gentle smile to go with it. She was no expert, but it occurred to her that Grace may have been fighting a rush of anxiety out there, all alone, before she joined her. It might be why Charlie had sent her after her... Or something else. Grace's startling admission that she struggled with reminders of her past also felt like tremendous progress in their fledgling relationship. Not that she viewed the woman as a challenge to be cracked, but Olivia meant what she had told Dana: she burned to know the real Grace Michaels. The woman of flesh, blood, and emotion behind her solid protective shield. And now... Was this tantalizing brush of the fingers intentional when Grace took the drink?

"Thanks, Olivia."

Olivia held back on a foolish grin. "You're welcome."

"I hope you didn't skip dinner tonight."

"No, I learned my lesson."

"Good." A healthy sip of the whisky brought color rushing back into Grace's pale cheeks, and Olivia warmed up under her typically assessing gaze. "Hmm. You look good in these clothes."

Right.Okay!Forget acting all cool and unaffected, as Olivia hoped to appear during this encounter. The genuine, unexpected compliment made her cough a little as she swallowed her own drink.

"Ah... I'm glad you think so."

Shopping ranked top three on her list of things she hated doing. As well as filing her tax report and getting out of bed early in the winter. But she had done that too and braved the pre-Christmas rush to find herself a new outfit for the occasion. And put a lot of care into it, so it was great that Grace noticed. Olivia wore black ankle boots, polished to a high gloss, with a silver buckle on the side. Dark-fitted trousers with shimmering shades of dark red and purple along the thighs. And a charcoal V-neck t-shirt under a classic biker leather jacket that she hoped made her look tough. All vegan wear, of course. The new clothes had cost a small fortune, but it was worth every penny to now see such an approving and appreciative look on Grace's face. It would be hard to impress her, Olivia knew. And she wanted to. Very much.

"Dressed up for the award, did you?"

"Yes and no, actually." Olivia added a casual shrug, not to look too eager, even as she admitted the truth. "I wanted to look good in case I ran into you."

Grace stared impassively, long enough to make her squirm on the inside. But then, Olivia found herself on the receiving end of one of her blazing smiles. These were both rare and gorgeous enough to make her heart skip a beat.

"You're shaking. Is that because I complimented you?"

Olivia snorted, for added effect, even as she denied it. Grace was not that far off... "I'm shaking because it's freezing cold out here." Obviously!

"Ah." Smiling still, with a hint of challenge now, Grace took a step closer. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Olivia stuck to her guns, even if her core temperature shot up one or two degrees at

the nearness of her. She could smell her perfume again, more intoxicating than expensive whisky. They were alone on the balcony. And Grace had that irresistible look in her blue eyes. Smug, playful. Hot. Olivia badly wanted to kiss her. Surely, it would go a long way to destroying the woman's silly preconceived ideas about her. Baby butch dyke, my ass. Olivia stared at her full red lips. Hmm... So bloody tempting to lean in and do it. Should I? Her pulse began to race at the thought of going for broke with the ever-alooof and cool Grace Michaels. But then... Yeah, I really should.

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Grace told herself not to encourage this sort of behavior. It was foolish. Doomed to fail. And yet... Olivia's admission that she had dressed with her in mind had been touching; probably because it was so honest and unpretentious. It hit the mark with Grace, where more sophisticated attempts at seducing her would have been unsuccessful. Not that she was seduced, of course. But all the same, something about the woman was a little hard to ignore. She was too young; Grace admonished herself. Too butch. Definitely too sweet. But the intent look in her eyes right now also hinted at something more. Despite her claim that she was freezing cold, her smoldering brown eyes reflected plenty of heat. Olivia Bianchi always looked at her with a hint of fascination, admiration, and sizzling hunger. Without the latter, Grace would not still be standing there, tempted to engage. Hero worship, she could do without. But curiosity, respect, the push and pull of opposites as they slowly took the measure of each other, was difficult not to enjoy. She noticed Olivia staring at her mouth and the way she unconsciously moistened her lips. When she met her gaze and shifted slightly, Grace stared right back at her with a provoking smile. Would Olivia give in to the impulse she felt, which was easy to guess? Grace found herself wishing that she would. She was well aware that if the evening had not been so taxing for her, bringing too much of the past back into focus, she would never have sought refuge outside. When Olivia showed up on the balcony, she'd just managed to subdue a rising tide of anxiety. Now adrenalin still flooded her system. Add to that a few sips

of fiery whisky and Olivia's new look, which brought out a more mature, mysterious, and sexual side to her, and Grace could not quite remember why this might be a bad idea.

chapter 13

"So," she prompted with a hint of teasing laughter. "What now, Ms. Bian—"

Grace had wondered if the woman had it in her to surprise her. Olivia showed that she did by stepping into her, nice and bold, and framing her face in both hands. She pressed her lips to hers, cutting her off in style. Surprisingly warm hands. Hot lips softly parted. She lingered just long enough for the moment to register, then pulled back and blinked a couple of times as if she'd shocked herself with the gesture. But then she smiled and raised a cool eyebrow.

"It's Olivia to you, Ms. Michaels. Rememb—"

It was Grace's turn to interrupt in her own style. For sure, two could play this game, and she stopped trying not to react. Granted, it was no longer such a conscious decision. Just a case of...Fuck it. And go with the flow. She grabbed the woman by the lapels of her new jacket, spun her around, and pushed her back against the railing.

"Uh..." Olivia gasped in surprise and disbelief, though a grin of approval quickly replaced this. "Grace," she started to say. "I—"

"Shut up," Grace ordered, and she kissed her back.

There was a muffled 'Umph', and Olivia stiffened at first. Just in more surprise, Grace understood, rather than reluctance at the intensity of the kiss; or she would have stopped instantly. At the back of her mind, she did warn herself to take it slow. But even despite it, the kiss was hard and commanding in equal measures. Feeling

Olivia relax into her, Grace moved one hand to the side of her neck, her thumb resting on her cheek. Smooth skin burned and tingled tantalizingly under her fingertips. She deepened the kiss and felt a thrill when Olivia responded. But as she automatically brought her arms up around her, Grace clasped her wrists and brought them firmly down. The message, though unspoken, was crystal clear. 'I'm in charge here.'

Olivia obviously received it perfectly and responded with a soft moan that had the small hairs on the back of Grace's neck standing up. A pleasurable tingle shot between her legs. Somehow, she was already pushing between Olivia's strong thighs. Gosh... She ached to touch her. Did the new outfit include a bra under that V-neck? Or would she encounter more heated bare skin? She could feel Olivia's pulse on the side of her neck, pounding attractively. The kiss gathered momentum and intensity. It grew fiercer and more demanding on both sides until, through a haze of arousal, Grace suddenly perceived voices in the background. People were coming out. With that, reality flooded back in, as well as a startling awareness of the situation. Jesus! What am I doing? A little more of this, and she would end up going too far. Would Olivia stop her? The jury was definitely out on this one, so Grace had to. Stop right now, for Christ's sake! She wrenched her mouth away and felt instant loss. Disappointment flared across Olivia's eyes in a similar fashion. They were huge; her pupils were fully dilated, almost black with arousal.

"Steady up," Grace instructed in a murmur.

Just as she turned, her brother Jeremy walked out onto the balcony.

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Olivia picked up her glass of whisky. She could not remember putting it down. The Michaels twin was accompanied by a tall, lanky woman in a shimmering black dress, who seemed to only have eyes for him. When he settled it on his sister, Jeremy's gaze was as nasty as his scowl.

“Grace.” His eyes swept over her, and then Olivia felt a chill as he took her in with the same look of condemnation and distaste. “Huh. Typical,” he snorted.

Was he referring to her? Or what he could read on her face? Olivia had just had a second to compose herself between one of the most exciting exchanges of her life and having to pretend that she was not on fire, still burning from head to toe. If Grace had not stopped when she did... Olivia was not sure how much further they might have gone. Just that she had not wanted her to stop.

“Picking up right where you left off, huh?” Jeremy went on with a dark sneer.

Olivia was already no stranger to Grace's cool glances and sometimes wintry comebacks. But never had she seen in her eyes such coldness as her brother's stare provoked. Grace took a step aside to stand just slightly in front of her, an obvious protective move that made Olivia want to reach for her hand in return. Keenly aware that Grace might not need or want her support, she just allowed her fingers to brush against the back of her hand. The gesture was as brief as it was subtle. Feather-like. In the shadows, no one would see. And though Grace did not look at her, Olivia was vindicated when she spotted a tiny sign of relaxation in the set of her shoulders. She breathed a bit better. She had no idea what family drama may be going on between

the two siblings, but she felt protective, too.

“Let’s go back inside, Olivia,” Grace said.

“Not so fast.” Jeremy stepped in front of her, deliberately blocking their way.

Calm and collected, Grace met his gaze. “Yes? What do you want?”

“Your little take-over bid ain’t gonna work,” he spat.

“Are you talking about my proposal to Chloe?”

“Yeah. Plotting behind mine and Reece’s backs? You have no fucking right to get involved. By law, you have no right! And you know it.”

“Unless I’m asked to help out, of course. And don’t worry. The proposal is more like a rescue package deal. If it were a take-over bid, brother, you wouldn’t know it until I’m sitting behind your desk.”

Olivia suppressed a smile at the way she so easily put him in his place and established superiority. Grace also spoke in such a casual tone that some might miss the edge of steel underneath. It was obviously not lost on Jeremy.

“Keep your hands off my business,” he snarled. “Stay out of my life. And you.” Olivia was surprised when he addressed her directly, with a finger pointed at her chest. “She’s dangerous, you know? And a coward as well.”

Vicious words designed to hurt his sister and plant seeds of destruction in her own mind. His date sniggered. Olivia all but felt the effort it took for Grace not to react to this, though when she spoke, her voice was firm and steady.

“Let’s go, Olivia.”

Olivia ignored the man’s last taunting smile as she walked past him and followed Grace back into the reception hall. It was still full of people mingling, chatting, and connecting. Having a good time.

“Dammit, I left my drink behind,” Grace muttered.

“I’ll get you another,” Olivia was quick to volunteer.

“No.” Grace clasped her wrist and squeezed. “Dance with me.”

Oh, shit. Panic and elation hit as Grace led her to the dance floor, turned to face her, and laced a commanding arm around her waist. Elation, because being pressed against the woman’s strong slender body was fast becoming her favorite thing. And panic because Olivia knew even less about dancing than she did about string theory.

“Close your eyes,” Grace instructed.

“What? No, I... Why?”

“Because you’re tense. So, close your eyes and follow me.”

“You like this, huh?” Olivia grumbled as she complied.

“What?”

“Leading.”

“Oh, yes...” Grace’s chuckle was an alluring flutter against the side of her face. “In all things.”

All...?Olivia's racing mind went nicely blank in wonder. And then, somehow, it was all fine. She managed not to trample over Grace's designer shoes, her biggest fear. She allowed herself to tune in to her movements and to follow her lead. Relaxation came easily, and enjoyment, too.

“You’re a natural at this.”

“You’re kidding.” Amazed, she opened her eyes.

“Of course not. Why would I?”

“Because you— Oh...”

Olivia lost her words as Grace sent her spinning on a daring double twirl and caught her expertly on the rebound. Standing behind her now, still holding her nice and secure, and bending at the knees. What the...

“Go with it,” she invited. “What feels natural.”

Olivia’s hips seemed to know perfectly what to do, even if the suggestive swaying circle that Grace prompted her into had her blushing a little.

“Nice. Now you have it, Olivia. It’s the spirit of the dance. Don’t be shy.”

Grace never broke eye contact as she shimmered and glided all around her, dispensing useful encouragement and frequent smiles. She always looked supremely at ease in her own body, and the dance only made this more apparent. Olivia reflected that she was one hell of a good teacher. And the dance floor was obviously a safe space for Grace. As the music shifted from a lively Latin number to one she actually recognized, Grace gave her a final twirl, then tugged her back into her arms. The embrace was close and tight. Olivia was reminded in that instant that Grace was slightly taller. Mushy as it may be, she could not help liking it.

“I love this song,” Grace murmured.

“Wicked Game. So do I,” Olivia approved and watched her blue eyes sparkle.

Some guy in an ill-fitting tux jacket must have failed to read the signs as he tapped Grace on the shoulder.

“May I?” His smile was directed at Olivia.

“Uh... No, thank you,” she answered.

On a chuckle, Grace had her halfway across the room, like waltzing on a cloud, even before the guy could shut his mouth from the shock of surprise.

“Grace. We’re being rude.”

“Yeah? I don’t care.”

Olivia laughed at the reply, so typical of the woman, while in the background, Chris Izaak sang tantalizingly of not wanting to fall in love.

“Anyway, this guy obviously didn’t think I was too butch, huh?” she prompted.

Just an innocent, off-the-cuff comment, she figured. But the reply was a little dry.

“To be honest, I think he was drunk.”

“Ah...” Olivia raised a shoulder in a light shrug. “I guess.”

Grace went on. “You told me you made an effort to look good tonight.”

“Not for some random guy.” Hadn’t she said that already?

“Yes.” Grace nodded with a thoughtful and lingering smile. “But you can’t blame other people for noticing. You obviously have no idea of how well you succeeded in your attempt, Olivia. I’d say the fact that you’re genuinely not aware of it is even more attractive.”

Oh...Okay!This was one hell of a compliment wrapped up in that statement. Olivia relaxed.Don’t be so bloody nervous!She probably just needed to get used to Grace’s style. She could be so serious and focused at times... But also funny, with frequent flashes of flamboyance.

“Attractive enough for you to want to kiss me,” she smiled.

“You kissed me first,” Grace reminded her.

“Because you teased me into it.”

“Oh?” A teasing eyebrow immediately arched up. “Is that right?”

“Yes. Totally.”

“Only because of that?”

Gosh...Olivia could never pretend, not even for fun.

“No, Grace,” she murmured. “I wanted to kiss you. Teasing only gave me an excuse.”

They may as well have been dancing on the moon or in the middle of space at this point, for all that Olivia was aware of the rest of the room and the people in it. She was only focused on the woman who held her, the light in her eyes, and the sudden, more intimate turn of the conversation. Such a rush, all of it! She did recall her friend’s words of advice and warning about not going too deep. Well. Too late for that...Dare she tell Grace she’d been thinking of little else but kissing her since their first encounter at Charlie’s house? As Olivia held her gaze and hesitated briefly, her feelings must have been all too obvious. Dana was always telling her that she was like an open book. Grace reacted before she could say anything else. Olivia noticed a telling shift in her expression. The instant tightening of her pupils, a flash of regret and surprising sadness across her eyes. Oh, no...

“Grace, I—”

But the music stopped, the dance was over, and her partner released her. The gesture was as abrupt and significant as the close, warm, and natural embrace.

“Beautiful!” Charlie appeared out of nowhere to pull them both into a hug. “Oli, I didn’t know you were such a talented dancer! You two looked great out there.”

“Oh, I’m not really a—”

“Very fluid,” Grace countered as if annoyed that she might try to deny it. “Catching the right moves instinctively. Talented, yes.”

As Olivia stared, a little surprised at her intensity, she could feel Charlie looking from her to Grace and back again with undisguised curiosity.

“Darling,” she prompted, “have you told Olivia about your upcoming trip to Ottawa?”

“No.” Grace was frowning, discontent pouring out of her in waves.

Obviously used to this sort of thing, Charlie just went on blissfully. “I’m sure she would love it. Grace, I think the two of you should go together.”

chapter 14

It was typical of her aunt to jump in like that. Grace reflected on the unusual evening and awkward invitation on her flight back to Miami. She was due to return to Red Falls the next weekend to see to a few things: accompany Charlie to a medical check-up, speak to her sister about the deal, hunt down a reluctant Reece for a serious one-to-one, and fulfill a professional engagement. This latter, she was looking forward to. Janis Cassidy was a new architect on the scene who blended art, unconventional designs, and cutting-edge technology. Her latest creation, a mansion on the outskirts of Ottawa, was currently set up as an exhibition, and she had invited Grace for a private viewing. Spending time in Red Falls was a perfect opportunity for this since she could drive there and back in a day. Grace had planned to travel to Canada on her own. She still did, even after seeing Olivia’s face light up like a Christmas tree at the mention of Cassidy. Back in her office, in her usual environment, Grace found it hard to concentrate. Flashes of velvety dark eyes and sensual lips kept coming back into

her mind. Even with fifteen hundred miles in between them, the intriguing Olivia Bianchi would not leave her alone. Grace had stopped thinking of her as just 'Charlie's young friend' by now. The dog-sitter. Olivia was tough and cute at the same time. Fourteen years younger but mature and strong in spirit. Grace only had to think of her subtle brush of the hand when Jeremy had been barking at her. Olivia had stood her ground next to her. Quietly, respectfully, but no less firmly. She was also extremely beautiful when she chose to let it shine. On impulse, Grace brought up her website for another look at her creations. Hmm. Yes... The pieces were exquisite. Though, once again, she shook her head at the clumsy set-up.

"Libby," she called over the intercom. "Send Joel into my office, please."

"Sure thing, Ms. Michaels."

As she waited for her web designer, Grace stood up to pace aggressively in front of her wall of windows. I shouldn't be doing this. Getting involved was a bad idea. Certainly, she'd made no promises...

"Just kissed her as if I was running out of air."

She grumbled in irritation. This had been another sparkling loss of control, for sure. At least she had managed to decline Charlie's unhelpful and, frankly, naive invitation on her behalf. And left Olivia with a clear understanding that nothing else could or would happen between them. One kiss, a dance... Too much already. So now, end of story. With a fresh wave of temper, she stabbed the intercom button again.

"Libby."

"Yes, Ms. Michaels?"

"Tell Joel not to—" About to cancel her previous request, Grace found herself

hesitating. And when did that ever happen? Losing my stupid mind... At a loss, she still decided to stay with it. "Never mind. Send him in as soon as he gets here. And tell him to hurry up, for God's sake! Haven't got all day."

"On it, Ms. Michaels!"

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"I'm just confused," Olivia admitted to Dana. "Really, it's clear as mud. The connection between us was out of this world, you know?"

"So you keep saying," her friend sighed. "And I get it, Oli. You kissed, and then she rocked your world on the dance floor. But what part of 'Let's leave it there' is unclear, exactly?"

"Hmm. I don't think she meant it."

"Olivia. Come on now."

“No, really.” Olivia had to laugh at her friend’s exasperated expression. “Bear with me.”

“I’m trying.”

“Look, I’m fine, okay? I’m not losing my head over just one kiss. Or, well, a couple. And a whirl on the dance floor.” Though Olivia, for sure, had replayed those scenes over and over in her head. “But I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh. Good to hear. Still, you’re talking nonsense.”

“I just think there’s a lot she keeps under wraps, that’s all.”

“Why?” Dana frowned suspiciously.

“I don’t know... Protection, probably. I get the sense there’s bad blood between her and some of the family. Her brother was nasty to her when we bumped into him the other night.”

“You could ask Charlie.”

“Absolutely not. First of all, she’s not the kind to discuss her family behind their back. Also, I don’t want to. It would feel too much like an invasion of privacy.”

“Alright, fair enough. Shame we aren’t from the Burlington area, or we’d know the history of its most famous family.” Dana considered. “You could ask around.”

“Again, I’d rather not. If Grace feels like telling me, she will. I do know she left a long time ago, and she’s had nothing to do with the family business since then. She’s a self-made woman. Only owes her success to her own hard work and talent.”

“Gosh, listen to you,” Dana snorted. “You sound so proud of her. So smitten already!”

Olivia shrugged. “What can I say? I like her.”

“Sounds like she’s the black sheep of the family.”

“Yeah... Her brother said peculiar things—”Shit.She’d not meant to share this bit.

“What things?” Dana prompted.

Reluctantly, Olivia told her. Predictably, her friend became even more reticent.

“Dangerous?” she repeated. “A coward? That’s the woman you’re all goofy-eyed about?”

“Trust me, I’m sure her brother was self-projecting all over the place. And Dana?”

“Yes?”

“Please, stop looking so worried.”

“I’ll make you a deal, darling. I won’t worry if you don’t go chasing after her.”

“Hmm.”

“Deal?” Dana growled.

“Fine. I won’t.” Olivia would hate herself if she turned into the chasing kind anyway.
“But if she gets in touch with me first, all bets are off.”

“Fine.”

They shook on it. Then, right on cue, Olivia’s phone beeped.

“Oh my God.” She beamed. “She sent me a text. It’s a sign!”

“She psychic too?” Dana rolled her eyes even as she also laughed. “Alright. What does it say?”

“Just to check my email.”

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“Well. Suspense is killing me, but I have to go to work for a scheduled surgery. Call me later, okay?”

“Yes. Good luck with the op.”

Olivia opened her laptop after she left and found an email from someone named J. Edwards, as Grace mentioned in her text.

‘Dear Olivia,’ the email read. ‘Please see the link to your new website below. Waiting to go Live pending your approval. I look forward to working with you on any edits required. Feel free to call me any time on my cell. Best, Joel.’

His signature listed him as Joel Edwards, Senior Web Designer, Brazen Inc.. And, indeed, it gave a phone number. Direct access? Unsure of how to feel about this unexpected gift, Olivia clicked on the link. And her eyes widened slowly as she took it all in. Somehow, this Joel had found a local news segment where she was interviewed about her work. One she’d actually planned to include on her own site but never managed to figure out how to edit. He had done a brilliant job of it. Some of her more recent work was highlighted, too, like the pieces she had shown to Grace on her phone. Her clunky old website had been transformed into more of a trailer-type animation which showcased her work exquisitely. Olivia bit on her lip as it occurred to her: How did this guy know which music to include? Pachelbel’s Canon in D Minor was her all-time favorite theme.

“Oh, gosh...”

Seeing her own creations displayed in such a splendid and thoughtful way made her

feel emotional. Grace. The complex and obviously complicated woman who said she did not want to get further involved had done this for her. What did it mean? Olivia took in a deep, steadying breath. It would not be chasing and making a fool of herself, would it, to call her now?

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Though still early in the day, Grace had already sweated at the gym, slayed a bunch of admin meetings, completed the last of her three holographic designs for the new nightclub because she liked to give her clients plenty of options and scope, and drunk entirely too much coffee. Indeed, all before ten A.M. She felt jittery, which she blamed on the caffeine, whilst also being aware that she was full of shit. There was only one reason for the slight tremor in her hands and a line of tension lingering annoyingly behind her eyes. And that reason was—Oh. She started when her cell phone rang. Olivia. Grace stared at the pulsing screen. Two things might happen now. Either the woman was calling to say thank you. Or to yell at her because Grace had no right to take matters into her own hands when it came to her personal business. Well. Only one way to find out.... She picked up.

“Hello.”

“Grace. It’s Olivia.”

“I know. How are you?”

“Brilliant.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes! About the website. WOW! I don’t know how to thank you... It’s AMAZING!”

So, Olivia was happy. Grace exhaled in relief quietly. She went back to her desk, sat down, and swiveled in her chair to gaze at the vibrant Miami sky—electric blue, not a cloud in sight. Olivia sounded equally joyful.

“Given what you’d said to me before, I wasn’t sure you’d appreciate my intervention,” she admitted.

“Oh, I was fully prepared not to.”

Spirited.Spunky.Grace appreciated that about the woman.

“But?” she prompted her with a smile.

“Ah, but I clicked on the link, and I was blown away. This is a full order of magnitude better than my old site.”

“Yes, I think Joel did a good job.”

“You saw the site?”

“Of course. He ran it past me first.”

“How did you know to include Pachelbel? I am in love with this music!”

“Joel did his research. Whatever we design for our clients, be it a website or a brand-new interior for a nightclub, is bespoke to the customer. Excellence goes a long way toward a reputation, so my people spend the time to get it right. And they do. Is there anything you’d like to change?”

“No, it’s perfect!”

“Okay. Tell Joel. He’ll take care of deactivating your old site for you and swapping domain names.”

“I will. Um, Grace... How much do I owe you for this?”

“Nothing, don’t be silly.” A loaded silence ensued, and Grace figured Olivia must be one of those people who struggled to accept gifts. “Problem?” she prompted.

“No... Just a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Why?” Olivia inquired softly.

Grace shrugged. “You do quality work and deserve to have it showcased properly. I happen to be in a position to help you achieve that. So, I did.”

“Simple as that?”

All Grace needed to say was, Yes. To tell her she was busy, which was true, and end this call. But in fact, it was not just as simple as that. She hesitated. Encouraged, Olivia went on.

“I thought we were done, you know?”

“We are.”

“Right, okay. But when you do something like this, it makes me wonder.”

Oh, Christ. “It’s business, Olivia.”

More silence greeted those words. Stubborn, uncooperative silence. The kind Grace was definitely not used to. People in her world did what they were told. Her company performed like the well-oiled machine she had designed it to be. Her staff gave her results and solutions, not questions or tantrums. The escorts she hired were all

experienced professional submissives who knew how much to tease and provoke in order to enhance the pleasure of the game. Her pleasure. Then, there was Olivia. Not staff. Not a hired escort. Charlie's friend. And she was just...What? Grace wondered as she stumbled in her own mind. A woman that she could not control and who challenged her sense of order and peace? One who made her want to kiss her again just by being on the phone? She rubbed her left temple where the headache was trying to migrate.

"Just do me a favor. Accept the gift and leave it at that," she instructed.

"Okay." But Olivia said that and went on to insist in the same breath. "If I didn't know any better, I would think you like me." Teasing. Warm. Hopeful.

Bad, Grace reflected. This was bad. Definitely should not be encouraged. And yet... She wanted to stay on the phone. Talk to her some more.

"I don't dislike you," she grunted in compromise.

Olivia gave a light chuckle. "Cool. I don't dislike you either, Grace. Okay, I'll accept the website."

"Halleluia."

"Yes, but on the condition you do me a favor in return."

Grace's right eyelid started to twitch. "What kind of world do you live in?"

"A daring one, apparently."

"I'll say. So, what's the favor?"

“I’ve been dying to see Janis Cassidy’s work. And it’s a long drive to Ottawa. I thought maybe I could come with you. Share the driving... Keep you company?”

Damn Charlie for planting that seed. The idea of spending a day alone with Olivia filled Grace with equal amounts of dread and excitement. This was not just about catching the work of a genius architect, she knew... Her headache flared.

chapter 15

Olivia was prepared to be denied, but she was still disappointed when it happened. Of course, the favor thing was just a joke. The generous gift of a brand-new high-tech website certainly did not mean that Grace had to do anything else for her. But at least on the surface, Olivia disguised the request as a bit of a tease, which helped to laugh it off when Grace said no. Olivia did not insist again after that. Just, ‘Sure thing. No problem. Well, thanks again. Bye...’ Dana would disapprove of this blatant attempt to chase, for sure. Olivia sighed and called Joel next, who turned out to be as helpful and friendly as his work was brilliant. He told her not to hesitate to call on him again if she needed to make changes or to feature new work and that he was now, as instructed by his boss, her personal web advisor. So, Grace had thrown that in as well...

“Never met a woman so confusing. What say you, Everett?” The cute puppy cocked his head and gazed at her with hopeful eyes. “And you’re just chasing treats. Alright, then.”

Olivia gave him one, then scooped him up and headed to her workshop. Might as well focus on something useful, eh. She put on her headphones, considered the slab of raw wood in front of her, and decided to go with the flow and see what happened. A couple of hours later, having managed to keep the enigmatic Grace Michaels out of her mind for more than ten minutes in a row, which felt like a major victory, she paused when her phone vibrated in her pocket. One look at the number

on the screen had her heart rate shooting through the roof. Grace. She whipped the headphones off.

“Hello again.”

“I have a vicious headache,” Grace announced as if it might be her fault.

“Oh?” A bit puzzled, Olivia frowned in wonder. “Well. Are you staying hydra—”

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“I’m going to Ottawa on Sunday. If you still want to come, I’ll pick you up at oh-seven-thirty.”

Now her stomach performed a nice double-flip.

“Oh yeah, I still want to come. Great! Uh... What made you change your—”

“See you then,” Grace cut again before ending the call.

So damn rude...And that temper was so attractive at the same time! It was probably a handy way to hide her irritation as well. Olivia suspected that Grace did not often change her mind after making an executive decision. She grinned at her puppy.

“You know what, Ev? I think the woman does like me.”

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Charlie was pleased at the news. “I’ll feel a lot better knowing you’re not on your own for the long drive, especially at this time of year.”

“I invited you to come,” Grace pointed out.

“Yes darling, but I wouldn’t be much help with the driving. It’s best if you have Olivia with you.”

Grace gave her a long look. Her aunt could drive, no issue there. Her cardiologist had given her the green light to resume life as normal. She’d started to exercise and had

found a personal trainer she actually got on well with.

“You just want me to take her, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Charlie grinned. “I certainly do.”

“Why?”

“You should have seen how good the two of you looked on the dance floor the other night.” Grace just shrugged, ready to terminate the conversation, but Charlie stepped forward to take her face gently in her hands. “You looked happy, darling. With the sort of smile I haven’t seen on your face in a long while.”

“Yeah, well... It’s nothing.”

“But you two are close?”

“No. Not really.”

“Grace?”

“We just...” Oh, for God’s sake! “Olivia kissed me.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “The other night at the awards?”

“Hmm. Yes. And I kissed her back.” Now her aunt blasted a smile bright enough to make her wish for sunglasses. “Don’t you turn this into a thing,” Grace muttered in warning.

“Oh, no. Far from me to suggest that you may be attracted to her,” Charlie chuckled.

“Good. Because I’m really not.”

“But Olivia kinda is, you know? I mean, it really is written all over her cute little face. I could tell from the word go, the day you met each other here. She couldn’t take her eyes off of you. She’s such a sweetheart.”

“You’re exaggerating.” Wishful thinking on her part, Grace knew for sure. But hey... Sometimes a little dose of denial could be helpful.

“She’s into you.” Charlie laughed, not going along with the program. “And I dare say you paid her a bit more attention than you normally would anyone else.”

“I don’t think so, Charlie.”

“Uh-huh. But now you’ve had an intimate moment.”

“Moment of weakness. It won’t happen again.”

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Just like agreeing to take Olivia with her had been foolish. Dammit. Well, too late to decide otherwise now. Grace would have to be careful. Not let that cute face and smoldering dark eyes sway her, even if Olivia stuck in her mind like a limpet to a rock. Not good. She was also far too unpredictable, another thing Grace was not used to. It occurred to her now that it was sort of appealing as well. Jesus.

“Grace?” When she sighed, Charlie pulled her into a gentle hug. “Just so you know, I like Olivia a lot.”

“Yes, I got that. I’ll go easy on her, don’t worry.”

“No, darling. I mean to say I hope you go with your heart. I think it’s time.”

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Olivia was all set and ready to go by 07:00 on Sunday morning. Dana arrived at 07:12 to pick up an excited puppy. They shared a cup of coffee and a quick chat. At 07:29, a powerful engine growl made them both glance out the window.

“Well, well.” Her friend raised an ironic eyebrow. “Your woman, I presume?”

“You got it, D.” Olivia grinned. My woman? Yeah, she liked the sound of that.

Dana continued to stare. “I hope she’s got appropriate snow tires on that show-off muscle car.”

Olivia had not given a thought to the kind of vehicle Grace might show up in. But

this, a dark-burgundy latest model Ford Mustang, suited her like a tailor-made outfit. Sexy and powerful, with a slice of badass and dangerous thrown in...Perfection. At precisely 07:30, Grace honked.

“Jeez.” Dana snorted. “The impatient kind, is she?”

“Just punctual, I suppose.” Olivia grabbed her coat.

“She growls, she honks, and you go running? She not going to come in and say hi?”

Olivia laughed, kissed her puppy, and hugged her.

“We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. Gotta go! Thanks for puppy-sitting, I owe you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Have fun. And be careful!”

While still under the 07:30 mark, Olivia sank into the plush front passenger seat of the gleaming car.

“Good morning, Olivia,” Grace greeted her in that elegant, husky voice.

“Hi, Grace.”

Olivia did her best not to stare or smile too hard, but it was a challenge. Grace was dressed for the occasion in a pair of blue jeans that hugged her slender legs very nicely. Classic Nike on her feet, and a white V-neck sweater (it looked like cashmere) under a fitted black leather jacket. She smelled of good leather, which Olivia could not dislike even though it made her feel a bit guilty, her trademark expensive perfume, and a hint of strong coffee as well. Phew...She was alluring and tough at the same time, and Olivia felt instantly warmer when Grace cast her an approving look.

“You’re right on time.”

“Yep, usually am. Hey, cool ride.” And you look gorgeous, by the way.

She figured it best to hold off saying this sort of thing while they were still in front of her house... Didn’t want to give Grace an excuse to boot her out early, and she would not put it past her to do so.

“She’ll do,” the woman stated, and pointed. “Who’s that?”

Olivia looked back to see Dana at the window with Everett in her arms.

“It’s Dana. You’ve heard of her, right? She’s dog-sitting for me for the day.”

“Why’s she frowning at us like that?”

Olivia bit on her lip as Dana’s long list of reservations about ‘her woman’ popped into her head.

“She’s just being watchful. And a little protective of me.”

“Hmm.” Grace narrowed her eyes ever so slightly before once again nodding in assent. “Good friend to have.”

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“The best.” Olivia smiled, pleased at the endorsement. She waved to Dana, got a thumbs-up in return, and then gasped when Grace pulled off the curb like a rocket off the launchpad. And with zero warning whatsoever. The sudden acceleration sucked her deeply down into the bucket seat. “Jesus!”

Good thing all the snow had melted off the road, or they would be airborne by now. Or wrapped around a lamppost. Olivia could imagine the size of the eye roll that this departure must have caused from Dana. Her own exclamation earned her a chuckle.

“Sorry about that.”

“No, you’re not. Are you?”

Grace flashed an indulgent smile. “Not really. But you can relax. I know what I’m doing.”

It turned out she did. And anyway, no matter what, Olivia was the last thing from stressed. Her seat was comfortable, the car nice and warm, and the rising sun across a vividly blue sky promised a lovely day ahead. Grace drove fast and sure through downtown Red Falls. She was aggressively smooth behind the wheel, a contradiction in terms that perfectly fitted her driving style. And of course, the Mustang was a manual. It was Olivia’s turn to chuckle.

“Hmm?” Grace favored her with another easy smile.

“Where did you learn to drive like this?”

“On the track. I like speed and wanted to do it safely. So, I learned. I drive a Ferrari at home in Miami.”

Of course, you do.

“A bit of a daredevil but responsible at the same time,” Olivia observed. “I like that about you.”

“Good to know.” Grace also looked and sounded relaxed, perhaps because she was doing something she enjoyed. Olivia did not allow herself to think it might have anything to do with her presence in the car. “I’ll give you some tips when it’s your turn behind the wheel if you like.”

“Okay. Great! I’d love to learn how to do a handbrake turn if you know how.”

“I do know how.”

Grace downshifted brutally as a traffic light ahead started to turn orange. She floored it again, as if really trying to push her foot through, and managed to zoom across the intersection with a micro-second to spare.

“I was thinking earlier that I can never quite predict what you’ll say to me next.” The smile on her face indicated she liked that about her. At least, Olivia dared to hope.

“Why a handbrake turn, of all things?”

“First thing that popped into my head.”

“Ah.”

“And also, it’s kind of a sexy move, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Assessing blue eyes rested briefly on her face again, making her wonder what really was on Grace’s mind every time she looked at her like that. “Sexy, for sure.”

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So was she. Grace wondered why this astounding fact had not been more obvious to her before. Maybe because she had kissed the woman by now and tasted all that heat. It was a good thing her fast driving forced her to keep her eyes on the road, apart from the occasional glance aside. Every time Grace turned her head, she found Olivia watching her. These mysterious and smiling dark eyes took her in. Olivia was smiling a lot, for sure. Had she dressed to impress her again today? She had on sturdy boots that looked pretty new. Khaki cargo pants molded attractively to her butt and thighs. And a white T-shirt with a splash of red across the chest and the letters B.O.L.D in block capitals. Grace did not linger over the enticing swell of well-rounded breasts, though she certainly noticed. A tailored black blazer completed the look. Olivia’s style, she figured. Casual, warm, and comfortable. Yet, with an added touch of allure today, obvious in the sharp cut of the blazer and the gold creole earrings she wore. This attention to detail, Grace supposed, may be for her. The idea made her almost shiver. Yeah, she was impressed.

“How come Charlie isn’t coming?” Olivia wondered.

“She didn’t feel like it today.”

“Ah... But she’s alright, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s fine.” Without thinking, Grace reached across to pat her on the leg in reassurance. Tight muscles tensed attractively under her fingertips, and she quickly returned them to the steering wheel. “Since you are keeping me company, she said she’d opt out of a long drive, that’s all.”

Charlie had phrased it a little differently, of course. 'Three is a crowd' and 'You don't need me on your romantic road trip', had been some of her teasing comments. All of which made Grace grunt and roll her eyes. She was not about to share. But it was kind of Olivia to ask.

chapter 16

They stopped three-quarters of the way there for a cup of coffee and a stretch, after which Grace let Olivia behind the wheel.

"We'll keep stunt driving for when we get back on US soil, okay?"

“Sure thing,” Olivia laughed.

She was easy and interesting to talk to. Smart. She asked good questions and did not make them overly personal, which Grace appreciated. When a text from Chloe landed on her phone to say that the family had all had a think, and decided to accept her business offer, she felt comfortable enough to share the news with Olivia.

“I didn’t think they’d go for it, to be honest.”

“The stubborn kind, are they?”

“Yeah. But good for them, putting business ahead of pride for once.”

“Does that mean you’ll be spending a bit more time in our neck of the woods?”

“I’ll put people I trust on the job, so I don’t have to.” Though when she remembered the wistful look in Charlie’s eyes when she had mentioned Christmas, Grace was moved to temper that reply. “Maybe just a bit more time until the end of the year.”

“Right. It would make sense.”

“What are you doing for Christmas?”

“I’ll be on my own. So, just doing a bit of work and chilling in front of the TV with my puppy.”

“No family? Or are you not close to them?”

“It’s just my dad at this point. Last I heard, he lived in New York. We’re not close.”

“I get that.” Grace nodded and moved off the topic.

A full hour and a good laugh later, because Olivia insisted on observing the speed limit that Grace told her she considered as a recommended starting point, they reached their destination and signed in at the Cassidy property.

“The house is fully open to you and your guest for the next two hours, Ms. Michaels,” a security guard informed them. “No other visitors allowed in during your slot.”

“That’s correct,” Grace approved.

“Nice.” Olivia grinned as soon as they were out of earshot. “Private viewing, uh?”

“Insider’s privilege. Janis and I might collaborate at some point, so this is a professional perk.”

“Can I take pictures? For private use only.”

“Alright, yes.”

“Thanks!”

Olivia’s excitement was palpable, and Grace found herself observing her more than she paid attention to the glamorous interiors. Cassidy’s talent was reflected in every lavish detail: rich colors, expensive fabrics, dark polished woods. She made clever use of glass, smooth curves, and elegant shapes. Grace studied the way Olivia moved through the space with her camera. She was interested to see which angles she selected and took pleasure in discovering the mansion through her eyes.

“God! Will you look at this?”

Olivia stopped in the kitchen in front of the main counter, shaped from a large slab of charcoal grey granite. Deep sinuous grooves carved into the top gave it the appearance of a wind-swept sandy beach.

“It reminds me of a river delta,” Grace remarked.

“Yeah!” Olivia nodded in enthusiastic approval. “Exactly like that, you’re right.”

Tiny shards of crystal embedded into the textured grooves glinted like stars under the overhead spotlights. Grace observed pleasure and emotion reflected across her face as Olivia took it all in, and traced her fingers along the outline of a groove. Long, strong, agile fingers. How would they feel caressing her skin? As Grace wondered, Olivia just happened to glance up. Meeting her eyes, she flashed an intent smile.

“Thank you so much for letting me accompany you today, Grace. Being able to see all this with my own eyes instead of on the web or in a magazine is making me feel incredibly inspired and fired up.”

“It’s a pleasure, Olivia. If you ever come down to Miami, I’ll introduce you to Janis. Your own work would fit perfectly in this kind of space.”

“Thank you.” Olivia looked a little startled at this, a bit shy, and incredibly beautiful. “Wow. That would be great. I’m very... It means a lot that you think this about my work.”

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In two quick steps, Grace could be over there if she chose to. To plant a hard kiss over these gorgeous lips, feel the heat of the attractive flush across her cheeks, and add some more of her own... She gestured to the rest of the house instead.

“We’ll sort something out. Where to next, Ms. Bianchi?”

Olivia beamed. “Let’s go see what Janis did upstairs.”

The two hours went by in a flash. As they were leaving, Grace was taken aback to find that the previously limpid blue sky had turned a frigid gray. A fierce biting wind made her eyes water.

“Looks like snow,” Olivia remarked. “Not forecast, was it?”

“No. I’ll drive,” Grace decided. “Let’s beat this storm.”

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It was as if the storm heard her and decided not to play ball. By two P.M, the sky had darkened even more. First, there was sleet. Then, it began to snow. The wind strengthened to gale force, and an excited news radio guy warned anyone currently listening that a magnificent freak storm was about to slam into them, ‘Damn good and hard’, according to him. Back on the US side of the border, it was the same. Drivers were advised to get off the roads and indoors ASAP.

“Why do they always say that,” Grace muttered. “Make it sound worse than it is.”

Olivia peered through the windshield at a thickening wall of fat white flakes. “I don’t suppose you get this sort of thing often in Miami.”

“No.” Grace smirked. “We get hurricanes.”

“Sure. I just meant this is different. So—”

“So, is this a roundabout way of telling me you think I don’t know what I’m talking about, Ms. Bianchi?”

“It was. But that’s okay. I’m enjoying it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah.” Olivia chuckled. “Stubborn looks sexy on you.”

After the amazing property tour, she felt relaxed. It was nice and cozy inside the Mustang, and the whiteout added a touch of romance to the whole situation. Her comment earned her a stern look, but Grace soon flicked her eyes back to the road when the vehicle in front fishtailed almost out of control.

“Now this guy clearly can’t drive,” she pointed out. “He shouldn’t be out here in these conditions.”

Stubborn and arrogant, just the right amount. Olivia threw her a fond, probably overly mushy glance. The sort that would make Dana roll her eyes. Grace missed it, probably also for the best, but it was unavoidable for Olivia at this point. The kind of woman who looked like Grace, talked tough, and had the skills to back it up, always made her feel weak at the knees and her heart beat faster. Grace Michaels, for sure, was all manners of charming and wonderful.

“Snow’s getting worse,” she remarked.

“Hmm.” Grace rumbled as traffic, scarce as it was, slowed to a laborious crawl.

They passed a line of semi-trucks stopped on the side of the road; these guys must have decided to wait it out with a snooze in the back of their cab. Half a mile on, a farm tractor was trying to pull a pink VW Beetle from out of the ditch. A police cruiser coming the other way flashed his lights. The officer behind the wheel rolled his window down as he went past and passed his fingers in a slicing motion across his throat. Shaking his head. The message was clear, and Olivia agreed.

“Our best bet is going to be a Super 8 at the next exit,” she advised after consulting her phone. “In a town called Dodger.”

“Are you making this up?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You want me to stop at the Super 8 in Dodger?” Sarcasm, even when directed at her, also nicely suited Grace’s gorgeous lips.

“Better than spending the night in a freezing car in a ditch,” Olivia stated. “According to this, the weather is set for the next few hours. It’s only going to get worse.”

“Wouldn’t drive us into a ditch, would I?” Grace protested. Still, she must have seen the wisdom of the advice because she changed lanes and took the next exit. “Let’s just hope we don’t get murdered in Dodger. Sounds like a town from a horror movie.”

Olivia grinned. “I’m sure Dodger is delightful. Hey, look at this!” She brandished her phone in triumph. “There’s a vegan pizza place just across the road from the motel.”

“Must be my lucky night, then.” More sarcasm.

“Ever had vegan pizza before, Grace?”

“Nope.”

“Ever wanted to?”

“Negative.”

Olivia spied a faint smile, trying to escape on her lips. She liked to see Grace struggling a bit to hang on to her serious face and decided she would enjoy challenging her some more as the evening went on.

“I just hope they have rooms left. We’re obviously not the only ones who had the same idea.”

Indeed, the Super 8 was packed on account of the weather. They managed to snag the last room. Lucky again. The discovery that it only included one double bed had Olivia swallow a little hard. She glanced at Grace, whose first reaction was to pull off the sheets and inspect the mattress.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure it’s clean. Yeah, that’ll do.” She turned to her, hands on hips, still in her jeans and leather jacket. Giving off bigboss vibes and vibrant femininity at the same time, Olivia noted. The woman made her heart jolt with her next words. “So, Olivia. Wanna play?”

Olivia had a sudden vision of Grace pushing her against the desk, bending her over, and yanking her pants down. It literally took her breath away for a quick second. She blinked, swallowed again, then recognized a telling flicker in her eyes. Amusement, humor, a touch of wonder. She was being teased again. Tested? Challenged? The question was: did Grace mean some of it or not? Olivia cocked a hip, matching her swagger. And she jerked her chin.

“Why not? What have you got in mind?”

It must have been the correct answer and the right attitude because Grace flashed an approving smile and tossed her the keys to the Mustang.

“Going to make all your dreams come true, Ms. Bianchi.”

It turned out this meant teaching her stunt maneuvers in an empty parking lot instead of having heated sex in their shared bedroom. Though with Grace in full instructor mode, Olivia figured it was also stimulating foreplay for the mind. She did not tell her that.

“It’ll be even better sliding on snow,” Grace declared with a wicked smile. “Quick bit of theory first: it’s the rapid change in direction that’ll cause the rear wheels to lose grip. So you have to have decent speed and then induce weight transfer.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Well, you want the weight of the car on the outside of the turn, right?”

“Uh... Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Grace confirmed, frowning at her hesitation. “So if you intend to turn left, flick the steering wheel to the right. And vice versa the other way. Makes sense so

far?”

“Yes, okay.”

“Good. Perfect timing is required to pull the handbrake. Now imagine a semi-circle representing your 180-degree turn. Your goal is to lock the rear wheels roughly forty-five degrees into the arc.”

“Got it.”

“Go too early, and the back end won’t get loose enough to slide; do it too late, and your turn will be pitiful.” Grace inflected enough disdain into the word to make Olivia dread the result. No way would she be pitiful during this exercise. “You have any questions?”

“Yes. When do I use the clutch?”

“You don’t need the clutch for this. Don’t touch the brakes either.”

“Uh... Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure. We’ve got plenty of space over here; you’ll be fine.” Grace actually licked her top lip in anticipation. “Ready to practice?”

Olivia was dying to kiss her, actually. She chuckled, feeling nervous and excited at the same time. It was quite a while since she’d done something silly and spontaneous just for the sheer fun of it. And the woman who sat next to her made it all even more thrilling. If Dana could see me now...

“I am ready.” She shot Grace a grinning wink. “Buckle up, Ms. Michaels, and prepare to be dazzled.”

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It took a few attempts. Olivia seemed convinced that 30mph was fast, for God's sake! Eventually, she got the approach right. Then, struggled with the on/off timing of the handbrake.

"Okay, let me show you."

Grace scooted up close to wrap her hand on top of hers. The second she did, the power of the connection hit her like a ball of fire. Slamming across her chest. Spreading like a heated wave. Man...It was surprisingly intense, instantly throwing her into the zone. Her focus was crystal clear; she could feel the woman's... What was it? Presence? Being? Allure, she decided. Only then did it occur to her how much attraction was still present, simmering under the coals, only waiting for a little poke to sizzle again. Grace did not pull back. It would be too awkward at this stage. She was also beyond wanting to.

"Relax," she murmured. "You are too tense."

"Don't want to be pitiful," Olivia grumbled and made her laugh.

"You won't be." Grace had her free arm on the back of her seat. Now she passed it around her shoulders. "We'll do this one together. Ready?"

Olivia bit on her lip attractively. "Yes."

"Then go for it."

Good speed. Good initial turn. Good weight transfer.

“Now,” Grace instructed, and at the same time, she guided the pull and release of the handbrake.

Olivia followed through with her beautifully, surrendering just enough to make it work and into a perfect slide. She gave a little shriek and laughed at the same time.

“Keep it going. Release. Accelerate. Yeah! Beautiful!”

“Okay, I got it now.”

“Yeah? You sure?”

“Yes. Let me do it again. On my own this time. Don’t say anything.”

Amused, Grace slid back to her seat, crossed both arms and remained silent. Olivia nailed it. And then a couple more times without her help.

“Aha! What do you think of that, uh?” She beamed with a triumphant smile.

Without really meaning to, Grace took a mental picture of the moment. Olivia, grinning at her with sparkling eyes. Happy. Just the two of them performing silly stunts in the middle of a storm. This, she would not forget in a hurry.

“Pretty perfect,” she nodded.

“It helped when you did it with me that one time. I learn best when I can feel.”

“Uh-huh.” The words, innocent as they were, sparked a few ideas in Grace’s mind. What else could she teach? Show Olivia to feel with her.

“Thanks, Grace. It was awesome.”

Olivia clasped her hand in warm fingers, no longer with any hint of shyness or hesitation. Grace noticed the way she held her gaze, also with quiet confidence—like an equal. Where she might have rushed to take the lead again, filling the silence with a quick reply, she just relaxed.

“I enjoyed teaching you.”

“Now, can I buy you dinner?”

“I would like that very much.”

Fortunately, the vegan restaurant was just across the street, and they hurried to it in the middle of a blizzard. It was a total white-out by then, and you had to give points to any restaurant that offered a real fireplace in this weather. Double points when they also gave you the best table in front of it.

“Not a bad start,” Grace decided.

And figured even better when she spotted Châteauneuf-du-Pape on the menu. Over a glass of the smooth, full-bodied red, she grilled her dinner companion about her vegan diet.

“It’s not a diet,” Olivia corrected gently. She then explained that although it could be viewed as such, for her, it meant a lot more. Like a moral and ethical lifestyle choice. “If you ask most people if they are against cruelty to animals, the answer’s always Yes. But when you ask the same people if they are vegan, more often than not, they tell you No. And outline some way to justify it that doesn’t even stand up to their own argument. It’s crazy how disconnected good-hearted people can be from the violence that they create with their choices.”

“Hmm.” Grace found no argument with that.

“So, rather than supporting the cruelties and slaughter that animals are subjected to for food, clothing, entertainment, and testing, I choose to align my actions with my morals and leave needless suffering out of my lifestyle.”

Once again, Grace could not fault her reasoning.

“I like people who prioritize being in conscious alignment with their values over making easier, lazier choices,” she said.

“Cool. So do I.”

“Does it bother you that I’m wearing this?” Grace pointed to her own jacket. “And the leather seats in the Mustang?”

“I don’t let it bother me,” Olivia answered with a smile. “I live in the world, you know? So I share my views when invited and educate when I can. I think until all human beings find peace on the inside, we won’t see it reflected on the outside. I do my part to support the change, and I don’t stress about the rest.”

“Very wise.”

“Yes... I’m pretty sure we’re going in the right direction as a collective. It might just take a bit longer for some to catch up, that’s all.”

“So, it’s a spiritual thing for you as well.”

“Yes.”

“What about the protein issue? Potential B12 deficiency and all that?” As Olivia gave her a brief summary that addressed all this, Grace nodded in approval. “You know your stuff inside and out.”

“Yep. I do when it comes to this topic.”

“I like it. You’ve made me reflect on a few good things, so thank you for that too.”

“No problem.”

“And you are definitely not a hypocrite.”

“True.” This prompted a chuckle. “I do my best. So, what would you like?”

“What?”

“Pizza.” Olivia reminded her by pointing at the menu.

“Oh.” It was surprisingly easy to forget things when talking to the woman, Grace realized. The more she got to know Olivia, the more she appreciated everything about her. Even enough to let her take the lead. “Why don’t you choose for me?”

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The restaurant offered a taster menu, so they went for it. And finished the bottle of wine between them. Grace’s verdict about vegan pizza, ‘Actually not bad at all’, sounded like high praise considering her standards. Olivia felt a little giddy, and not just from the wine. Listening to Grace relate stories from her time as a professional dancer was a real treat. When she shared about her life in Miami and her current work

and talked of what inspired her to create her designs and special places, Olivia recognized a kindred spirit. Grace was an artist. A creative, just like her, who also happened to have an excellent head for business. Olivia laughed in amazement when she described the holographic tool that she had created for herself.

“You can code? Wow, that’s impressive.”

“It’s not hard to learn,” Grace said with a complicit wink at her. “Like handbrake turns.”

It was lovely to feel her so at ease. Even though the hyper-dynamic woman could never be said to appear totally relaxed, at least she seemed to be enjoying herself. Olivia discovered that she had a knack for telling stories and that she was funny in a subtle, very attractive, self-deprecating way. Witnessing this other side of Grace was great. Less guarded. Yes, that was it. Not just more at ease but less reticent. And it was wonderful to feel her start to open up. The storm had eased by the time they left the restaurant. Main Street was covered in about eight inches of fresh snow. It made everything look quite beautiful, with a giant Christmas tree at the far end of the street and more decorations glittering along the sidewalk.

“I think I like Dodger,” Olivia decided. “It’s very—”

She was not paying attention to the zone of shadows on the side, and the two men seemed to appear out of nowhere. Grace must have been a lot more attentive, as there was no delay in her reaction. Before Olivia even realized there might be a problem, she had already grabbed her hand and stepped in front of her. The sheltering move was reminiscent of the night when her brother had come to have a go.

“Heyyyy ladies!” Drunk. Or high on something, judging from his uncertain sway. His buddy did not seem in much better shape. “Whatcha doing out here?”

They stood in the middle of the sidewalk, blocking the way. Grace barely slowed down her pace.

“Move aside,” she ordered.

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“Huh!” The first guy chuckled, exchanged a look with his friend, then opened his arms wide. “Go on. Make me.”

His eyes were cold and hard despite the chuckle, and Olivia wondered how intoxicated he actually was. Was this more of a ruse to induce the idea that they were harmless? It was getting on eleven P.M. A quick glance around revealed that they were alone on the street. Though the lights of the motel were visible on the other side, it was still half a block away. Earlier, this had felt close, even despite the blizzard. But now, aware of how quickly this type of situation could get worse, not so much. With a firm squeeze of her hand, Grace walked off the sidewalk and kept going forward. Or she tried to. Because now the other guy also got in on the game. Both of them keeping slightly in front with their arms out to the sides. Definitely trying to slow them down. When Grace veered off to the left, they blocked that way too.

“Don’t be so fucking rude, woman. Hey, Mikey. I think we got us a couple of lesbians here.”

“Yeah? Need a taste of the real thing, girls?”

Okay. Enough. Olivia pulled out her phone. “I’m calling the cops.”

“Yes,” Grace simply said.

“Whoa, whoa. Put that down, darling.”

“Get away from me.” Olivia jerked back, but he tried again.

“Come on, babe, don’t—Argh! FUCK!”

When Asshole #1 tried to snatch the phone out of her hand, Grace was quicker. She grabbed his wrist and pushed it down and toward him. At the same time, she seized his middle finger and bent it the other way until there was an audible crack. The move was fast, brutal, and efficient. The man screamed and dropped to his knees.

“I’ll make you regret that, cunt.” Asshole #2 snarled at her as he started forward.

Grace did not budge.

“Touch her again, or me, and it won’t be a finger I’ll break,” she warned, icy calm. “I’ll pull your dick out and shove it so far down your throat you’ll choke on it. Your choice. What will it be, dumbass?”

In the silence that followed her challenge, only the other guy’s pathetic whimpers could be heard. Glancing at her, noting the look of quiet fury in her eyes, it occurred to Olivia that Grace was quite prepared to deliver on her threat. Almost eager, in fact, as she stood there having a stand-off with a guy who was a head taller than she was and at least twice as wide. Not only fearless but vibrating with rage. Jesus.

“Come.” Olivia took her hand. “Grace?” The woman was as rigid as a piece of steel. “Come on, let’s go.”

No man dared stand in their way this time as they circled around them and crossed the street. Grace did not utter a word, and Olivia did not complain that her grip over her fingers was almost painful. She could feel a slight tremor through her arm. She knew instinctively that something was off. She waited until the door was safely shut behind them to turn to her and ask, but Grace beat her to it.

“Olivia.” She gripped her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. How are—”

“Sure?” Her hands moved to frame her face, and she stared intently into her eyes.

“Did he hurt you? Goddammit. If that son of a bitch hurt you, I’ll—”

“Grace. Relax.” Olivia laced her fingers around her wrists. “You were too quick; he didn’t even get a chance to touch me. How are you feeling?”

“Fine too.”

“You’re shaking.”

“No. I’m okay.”

When she dropped her hands and started to retreat, Olivia held on to her. Grace could deny it all she liked, but it would not make it any less true. “You’re not okay. What’s the matter? Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing.”

All stubborn again. And so hard with it too... Olivia could almost see the barricades. The great protective walls that Grace had temporarily let down over the last hours were falling back into place with alarming speed and finality. Her blue eyes were darker now, stormy with emotion. Reluctance, wariness, hurt... Sadness. All there for Olivia to see.

“Wait.” She refused to let her go. “Tell me—”

“I said it’s nothing!” Obviously flustered, and struggling for control, Grace shook her loose. Then apologized. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

She looked wounded, and Olivia ached to hold her.

“It’s okay,” she murmured.

“I just need a minute. Give me a minute.”

On that, Grace stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her. Hard enough to give the walls a good rattle. Olivia winced. She released a careful breath. So, that went well...

chapter 18

Grace held onto the sink with both hands and slowly counted to ten in her head. And again. One, two, three...Breathe. Four, five, six...Blood in the snow. Strange how she struggled to remember other things, yet could always recall that one detail so vividly. Maybe it was because the drops of blood had been in such stark contrast with the purity of the snow. Brilliant white and vibrant red. Beautiful. And a deadly sign too. Her throat constricted. Her chest tightened. She felt like choking. Dammit. Breathe! She did and splashed ice-cold water over her face. That helped. Then she sat on the floor and focused on clearing her head completely. She was good at that. Meditation had been a lifesaver at one point in her life. Slowly, her peace returned. And even more importantly, her control. After a couple more minutes, a discreet knock on the door made her look up.

“Grace? Look, I’ll leave you alone if you want, but first, tell me you’re okay in there. Please.”

Catching real concern in Olivia’s voice, Grace scrambled to stand up and she opened the door. “Hey.”

“Hey...” Olivia studied her face intently for a few seconds before flashing a relieved

smile. “You’re okay.”

“Yes.” Grace nodded. “All good now.”

When Olivia reached for her, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. When she pulled her into a warm embrace, Grace let it happen. And not just that, but she allowed herself to be held. There was a huge difference between simply accepting a hug politely, remotely, and sinking deep into a woman’s arms. Grace gave herself permission to do that now. Today they had been caught in a storm, side-tracked, delayed... A quote from Stephen King popped into her head. “I guess when you turn off the main road, you have to be prepared to see some funny houses.”

Not that Grace expected demon clowns to come knocking on the door any time soon; the two guys out there had been enough of a horror show. But the evening still struck her as a significant detour off her own track. An annoying disruption, or a gift, depending on which way she chose to look at it. For sure, it was a chance to spend alone time with a woman she found more attractive and enticing with every minute that she was in her company. Not her type, certainly... However, this had very little to do with usual lesbian stereotypes. Butch looked good on Olivia Bianchi. Outstanding. Grace’s kind just happened to be the ones she paid for, women who delivered what she asked for without requiring a lick of personal involvement in return. No emotions. No feelings. No complications. Easy. And Grace was always in control of these interactions. She decided what happened, when, where, and how. But today, decisions had not been hers to make. A well-timed storm, a convenient location... Only one remaining room at the only motel in town. One bed. And no escape. Not that Grace wanted to. And though the thought was startling, and made her head spin, she perhaps would not mind Olivia Bianchi being in charge of some of the decisions for a while. Like delivering a hug that made her want to close her eyes, and rest there for a long time.

“Here,” Olivia said after a while. “For you.”

“Thanks.” Grace took the bottle of water she offered. They sat at the end of the bed, side by side. Close. “Sorry about this, Olivia.”

“This?”

“Drama,” Grace shrugged.

“Ah.” Olivia seemed amused at her choice of words. “You don’t give yourself much slack, do you?”

Grace simply ignored that. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better now that I can see you are too.” Olivia clasped her free hand in hers and laced their fingers together. Again, so natural and easy. “Hey, Grace?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“What for?”

“Getting us out of a nasty situation tonight.”

Grace heard herself sharing stuff she never did. The words just came out of her mouth. “There was another time like this, you know? Many years ago, when I failed to do that.”

She glanced at her and found Olivia smiling back with eyes full of warmth and understanding. “I thought it might be something like that, yes.”

“How?”

“Your reaction... I didn’t think it was because you felt bad about breaking that guy’s finger.”

“No. And I didn’t break it, actually. Just pulled the joint out of alignment. Dislocated it.”

“Oh?” Olivia frowned in quick wonder. “I thought it must have snapped in several places from the way he screamed and carried on.” The frown eased into a more contemptuous chuckle. “Wimp.”

“Yeah.” It was defiantly sexy, the way she said that.

“I must admit I was a little scared, though. You know?”

“At least you didn’t look it. So, good for you. They would have fed on it otherwise. Like beasts.”

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“Not scared of them,” Olivia corrected, prompting Grace to narrow her eyes at her sharply. “And scared is probably a bit too strong a word, anyway. But I worried when I saw how furious you were, and realized you probably had the skills to hurt them both really bad.”

“I do. I could have.”

“Hmm. It looked like you almost wanted him to make the first move. To give you an excuse to beat the shit out of him.”

She was not wrong. Olivia wanted to know, which was fair enough, and Grace forced herself to admit it.

“I had a moment. It reminded me...” She lost the thread and stared with unfocused eyes across the room. Pristine white snow and darkening drops of blood. The strange metallic taste of it on her tongue. Rough knuckles smashing into her face. How’d you like that, bitch? Hold her down, guys!

“Grace.” When she shuddered, Olivia wrapped a steadying arm around her shoulders. Once again, bringing her back from the edge. “You know what?” she prompted.

“What?” Grace mumbled.

“I think you should tell me.”

???

“I’d been seeing this girl in secret. We were both seventeen and dead serious about the relationship. The plan was to go travel for a year, then move to New York and make it big. Me as a dancer, Miriam as a novelist. She was a fantastic writer.”

Olivia noted her use of the past tense. She grew a little tense but did not interrupt.

“We met on Christmas Eve to exchange presents. In Red Falls, in the park on Grandy Street. You know where that is?”

“Yes, I walk the dogs there often.”

“Mm. We expected to be alone there, but a guy Miriam had turned down several times when he asked her out showed up with his buddies. They’d been drinking, and they started having a go. The same way those guys started with us tonight.”

No wonder she’d reacted. Olivia could already tell this was going to be bad.

“When he tried to grab hold of Miri, I stepped in to defend her. One of the guys punched me in the face. They went for me aggressively. Believe it or not, Olivia, but I was the more butch of the two at the time. That set them off.”

“I can believe it.” Olivia nodded, prompting a faint smile from Grace.

“I told her to run. To get help. No cell phones in those days, you see.” Grace’s eyes darkened. “But she didn’t, bless her. She tried to defend me. To this day, I still don’t know which one of the men delivered the fatal blow. But they must have realized something had gone seriously wrong because, suddenly, they all legged it down the field. Miriam was lying on her back. They’d broken her glasses. Knocked them off her face. She lay with her eyes open, staring at the sky.”

Olivia exhaled. “Christ. Grace.”

“I shook her. Yelled at her to respond. I thought I knew she wasn’t just unconscious, but... I picked her up and headed to the nearest house. I don’t remember anything else after that. I woke up in the hospital two days later.”

“How badly were you hurt?”

“I had a skull fracture, smashed ribs, a broken arm. Miriam, she didn’t make it. Charlie was the one to tell me. She was there when I first opened my eyes... And every time after. She ate and showered at the hospital the whole time I was there to be with me.”

“What about your parents? Didn’t they come to see you?”

“Yeah. Once.” Grace curled her lip, though she looked more resigned than bitter now.

“They asked if the rumors that I’d been fooling around with a girl were true.”

“Fooling around?”

“Yeah, that’s how they put it. And they made it clear they expected me to deny everything.”

“Why?”

“Damage control. Having a lesbian daughter just would not do for them. Of course, I wouldn’t deny it. I told the truth, that I was in love with Miriam. So, they cut me off.”

Olivia could not have said which part of the story shocked her the most. The attack, the aftermath, the consequences... All of it was horrendous. It sickened her.

“Grace, I am so sorry.” She clasped her right hand in both of hers. Tight. “And about tonight, too.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“What happened after...” Olivia left it vague.

“After,” Grace nodded. She stood up and rolled her shoulders. “A bunch of arrests were made. Two of the guys were sentenced to life without parole. Charlie took me in. My body healed. I did go to New York, and become a dancer. I, uhm... I’ve never told anyone this story before.”

Olivia stood up as well, that last sentence scrambling all the wires in her brain.

“Never?” she murmured.

“No. I’m a very private person, you know?” A flash of color flooded back into Grace’s face as she turned to caress her cheek with a folded knuckle.

“Yes, I know.” Olivia nodded.

“But you’re special.”

“You said I wasn’t your type.”

“Maybe I was wrong about that.” Grace smiled in wonder, as if this did not happen to her very often, and leaned in to brush her lips over hers. Such a feather-light kiss... And yet it carried such weight. “What about you, Olivia?”

“Me?”

Grace held her chin, the smile turning gentle as she looked deep into her eyes. “A woman broke your heart. I can tell.”

“Well... Kind of, but I think I broke my own.”

“What do you mean?”

“Imagining a love story that wasn’t there. Holding on to it despite all the signs.” She winced, the truth of it suddenly crystal clear. “I won’t make that same mistake again.”

Grace looked like she may have been about to say something else but then didn’t. She just stared a bit harder, clearly hesitating, so Olivia stepped even closer.

“You won’t hurt me, Grace.” She did not quite dare to kiss her back. Not yet. But... Soon. “Trust me.” Olivia laid her fingers on the side of her neck and found blood racing under deliciously smooth skin. She did not try to hide her own shiver. “I want you, Grace.”

Now she did kiss her back. She made it slow but still intent. She wanted to kiss all that caution away. Now. Yes. Right now, dammit!

“Grace...”

“Yes.” Grace snapped the word in an almost growl.

Then laid a commanding hand on the back of her neck and took her mouth with bruising intensity. Oh, God! No hesitation. No holding back. The kiss was hot and fierce. Olivia wrapped her arms around her neck, fusing their bodies together. Apparently not satisfied until she had her pressed against the wall, Grace pushed until they were there. Heated tongues meshed together and danced. Grace cupped her jaw with her free hand, tilting her head back and slightly to the side, directing the kiss the

way she wanted it. That she was in charge and liked to be, was blatantly obvious. Olivia shivered in arousal, amazed to discover how much this sort of thing turned her on. And this was before Grace took her wrists and raised them above her head. Pinning her in place. Fuck!

“Look at you. So gorgeous.” She flashed a brilliant smile as she pressed her leg between hers, then swallowed Olivia’s moan with another deep possessive kiss.

“Let me touch you, Grace.”

“No.” The word, delivered with such a smug and sizzling look, almost knocked Olivia’s legs out from under her. “Later, I will. But for now, we’re going to do it my way. Okay with you?”

Olivia could barely speak. ‘O-okay.’

“Good. Stay still.”

Grace held her wrists in a single hand while she brought the other one back to her face. Cupping her cheek gently, she traced her thumb infinitely slowly over her parted lips. The gesture was surprisingly, deliciously tender in contrast to their earlier kiss. It elicited a sigh from Olivia. Her eyelids fluttered. Grace rumbled with what sounded like utter satisfaction.

“Eyes on me, darling.”

Olivia blinked sharply and re-focused. Did she just click her fingers at me? Yeah. This had just happened. Fiery tingles flared. Olivia would have laughed if she could have drawn enough breath. But she was too busy panting and trying not to moan. Or beg. Who knew this kind of arrogance could be so arousing? Of course, Grace only kept a loose grip over her wrists; she could have easily freed herself if she’d wanted to. But

this was way too good. She absolutely, thoroughly, categorically, did not want to be released.

chapter 19

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Olivia fixed her with a delighted expression that told Grace this must be a first for her. And although she could see how much it excited her, and felt the same, her own arousal was tempered by an edge of fierce protectiveness. Who'd have thought the woman could evoke this sort of reaction in her? The last time Grace had felt that way had been with Miriam. Just kids at the time, both of them. First love. The hardest loss. Her body had healed from its wounds. Grace had rebuilt herself stronger in all the ways she could be. Made herself untouchable. She hardened her spirit, and her heart as well. Part of her now wanted to play and relished the idea that this might be Olivia's first time with a dominant partner. Another part, long denied, also ached to show her how thrilling tender could be.

"Let's see how much you do want me," she murmured, and expertly flipped her around.

She made short work of the buttons on her trousers, pushed them down her strong thighs, and slid her hand over her lower abdomen. Over her cute cotton panties, and straight between her legs.

"Oh..." Olivia pressed back into her, hips pushing forward at the same time, into her hand.

"Hmm." Her panties were soaked. "You do, huh?"

"I told you," Olivia panted slightly. No longer held in place, she reached behind to clasp her hips. "I've thought of very little else since meeting you."

Having felt how ready she already was, Grace removed her hand and slipped it under

her t-shirt to discover smooth, soft, and very naked flesh.

“No bra?” She purred. “Hmm, I like your style. What were you thinking of, then? Tell me.”

“That you—” Twisting her nipple, making her breath hitch a little. “That I wanted to kiss you. Hold you. Touch you.”

“Be naked with me?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

With one arm laced around her waist, still pressed tightly into her from behind, Grace enjoyed the sensation of her body responding, undulating like a wave.

“I thought about it too, Olivia.”

“Really?”

Pleasure and a touch of disbelief jostled for prominence in Olivia’s tone.

“Absolutely.” With a swift and practiced move, cargo pants and t-shirt landed in a heap on the floor. Grace turned her gently toward the mirror mounted above the desk. She stayed behind, holding her close. Staring at their reflection, she smiled in true wonder. “Look at you. Hot. Dark. Magnificent. And you have no idea. I love that about you. And your kindness. I love how caring and sweet you are.”

She teased her panties down as she spoke and watched her expression. Olivia was squirming from the compliments. Rosy cheeks. Eyes glittering with a mix of shyness and desire. She was undeniably aroused. And yes, incredibly beautiful.

“I imagined what it would feel like to do what I am doing now.” Grace went on. “To watch the effect that it would have on you. To touch you, right...” She returned her fingers between her legs and, this time, boldly cupped her sex. Olivia gasped, trembled, and let out an alluring moan that seriously tested her control. “... Here,” Grace finished. “And hold you in the palm of my hand. Did you hope for that too?”

“Yes. I—” Her cheeks turned crimson red. “Yes.”

“You’re dripping wet on my fingers, Olivia. Too late to play the shy card, okay?” The remark had her partner twitching and chuckling at the same time. Amused, Grace stared into her wide and eager eyes. “So, come on. I want to hear exactly what was on your mind.”

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This was by far the most erotic situation...Ever, Olivia reflected. Sex for her before was always... Okay, she supposed. And even quite fun, on occasion. Once or twice, she’d managed to achieve something approaching satisfaction. And decided it must be it and that romance novels exaggerated how mind-blowing it could be. But this... Wow. It was on a whole other level and took her a moment to adjust. She was naked at this point and could not really remember how they’d got there. Had Grace just charmed the clothes off of her? Probably. Easily. The woman that she admired and lusted after in equal measures was still fully clothed, which added to the overall sense of excitement. And apparently, she liked to talk. Holding you in the palm of my hand...Hearing her say this as she was doing it had almost been enough to send Olivia over the edge. And now, Grace wanted to know details. Well. Olivia actually burned to tell her.

“Earlier, when we got our room and you were checking the bed...”

“Uh-huh?”

“You asked if I wanted to play.”

“Yes,” Grace encouraged, and she started to stroke her.

Olivia made herself focus despite the astonishing pleasure. This, she figured, was not simply erotic, but mature interaction. Evolved. And she was invited to play her part. The urge to please her partner, to make her feel as good, wanted, and appreciated, as Grace was currently doing to her, helped her to stay on track with the talk.

“I know it wasn’t about sex, but I still had this vision of you bending me over the desk.”

“This desk?” Grace prompted.

“Yes.” Olivia leaned back into her, secure in her grasp, and let her hips move to the rhythm of her caresses. “You yanked my pants down.”

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“Mm... I didn’t yank this time. But would you like that in the future?”

So there was a future to consider? Oh, gosh, Olivia certainly hoped so! She met her eyes in the mirror and found them bright blue and sharply fixed onto hers. Sparkling like ice in the sunshine.

“Yes.” She nodded, arching when Grace casually flicked her thumb over her clit. Oh, Jesus!

“Then what did I do, Olivia? That you liked?”

“You bent me over. Slipped your fingers inside me.” Taking care to say it right and not lose the thread of the fantasy she wanted to describe perfectly, though it was getting hard.

“How many?” Grace demanded.

That question alone, spoken in an urgent, husky tone, made Olivia twitch and clench in pure need.

“Uh— Two,” she figured, and immediately was granted her wish. It immediately hit the right spot. A rush of liquid pleasure radiated from her center core to every nerve ending in her body. “Grace!”

“Yes. I’ve got you.”

“I’m so close!”

“I know you are. Eyes open, Olivia. Look at me when I am fucking you.”

Fair to say these words shattered her universe. Olivia only had time to catch a glimpse of them both in the mirror before Grace clasped her jaw in her fingers, turned her head sharply toward her, and captured her lips in a filthy hot kiss. Her next whispered command was just the same.

“Come for me, baby.”

Helped by a well-timed rub of her clitoris, Olivia clenched, rocked, and fell apart in her arms. For a while after, she soared. The first thing she saw when she was able to open her eyes again was Grace’s smile. Her expression was thoughtful, with maybe a touch of awe. Definitely emotional. A little unsure, Olivia turned to face her fully.

“Grace?”

“It’s been a long time since a woman trusted me enough to let go the way you just did, Olivia.” Her eyes glistened. “Thank you.”

Words would not be enough, so Olivia kissed her. She had seen the telling shine, quickly blinked away, and understood why and where it came from. She poured not only all her desire for this extraordinary woman into the kiss but all her affection as well. And more... Arms wrapped around Grace, she held her close and tight. She allowed herself to taste her—deep, slow, and true. Never had kissing a woman felt so electrifying.

“I want to see you.”

“Of course you do.” A teasing smile was back on her lips as Grace pulled her own sweater over her head to reveal tight abs and a sexy black bra.

Not making her wait, as Olivia watched her, she unhooked the bra to free firm, generous breasts. Got rid of her jeans in one elegant move. Then simply stood in front of her in nothing but a lacy black thong. Smirking. Attractively daring. Olivia smiled in return.

“Grace Michaels. You are a miracle.”

“Oh, at least.” Grace planted both hands on her hips. “So, now what? Are you just going to admire it?”

“No.” Dropping onto the edge of the bed, Olivia pulled her by the hand until Grace came to straddle her lap. Wrapping one arm around her waist, she looked up into amused, hungry blue eyes. “I intend to feast.”

She did. Beginning by latching her lips around one nipple, swirling her tongue around it, and sucking gently, until the soft nub grew hard and tight. She did the same with the other one, taking note of Grace’s small sighs of pleasure and the way she pressed herself into her open mouth. Olivia enjoyed feeling her arms around her shoulders, cradling her, and the fingers of one hand fisted loosely in her hair. To hold and caress rather than to direct.

“I could do this all night,” she rumbled.

“Good to know. But I—”

Quick enough to disrupt her flow, Olivia maneuvered them both onto the middle of the bed. Making sure to remain on top, she caught Grace’s wrists and reversed their earlier position. She immediately felt her tense under her and coil. These blue eyes bore into hers with ruthless intensity.

“You want more.” Olivia kissed her lips, the delicate edge of her jaw, behind her ear.

“I’ll give it to you.”

“I don’t bottom very well. You should know that about me too.”

The sight of Grace sprawled across the bed with that look in her eyes, the one that said she was still very much in charge and could re-assert her dominance any time she damn well felt like it, was incredibly arousing.

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“Mm. But I like you like this.” Olivia leaned above her with a smug grin of her own. Playing with fire, and relishing every second of it. “I am enjoying testing your patience.”

“I think you’ll find I don’t have much of it.”

“But if I asked you politely?”

“To do what?”

In reply, Olivia pulled the lacy thong over her slender hips. She teased it down her impeccable legs. Moved to kneel in that sweet spot, and met her gaze straight on.

“This, if you let me,” she murmured.

And watched Grace’s eyes immediately narrow in reaction. Wariness and hesitation danced in them. Olivia could all but see the inner struggle going on. This was about more than sex, she figured, as certainly it was not the first time Grace found herself in this position. This goes a lot deeper. She understood trust would not come easy to her, and rightly so. The woman had been hurt. Wounded, physically and emotionally. Then betrayed a bit more and abandoned by her own family. Olivia ached to take some of that pain away. She wanted to earn her trust with every fiber of her being.

“I won’t hurt you, Grace.”

And for her as well, this promise was about a lot more than just the moment.

"I know." Grace shook her head in what looked like pure self-annoyance at her own hesitation. "I know!" She exhaled with it that second time as if the weight of the world had been on her shoulders. Then, with the alluring flash of a fleeting smile, just leaned back on her hands, arched her back, and slowly opened her legs. With absolute certainty, she said it to her. "I want you, Olivia."

Olivia could feel her own heart pounding as she went down between her thighs. She kissed her silken lips. Tasted clean arousal on her tongue. She delighted in the scent of her, endearingly sweet and enticingly musky. Joy flooded through at the realization that Grace really meant this; that she did want to be with her. For sure, Olivia's confidence had been in bits since her breakup, but now... Now it was like waking up to bright morning sunshine. To hope and possibility. She closed her eyes, sealed her lips around Grace's sensuous core, and lost herself in the sensations. Her lover was slick, hot, and pulsing against her questing tongue. Wetness coated her chin. She's so damn beautiful! Olivia was determined to get her all the way. She thought she probably would have if insistent fingers had not pulled her up after some time.

"Olivia." Grace reached for her with an urgent look in her eyes.

"What's wrong—"

"Nothing. I need to hold you. See you. Kiss me!"

It felt at first as if she might be taking back control... But actually, not quite. Because as Olivia kissed her, she understood her sizzling need for even more connection. She quickly moved to sit with her legs around her hips. Facing her. Earned herself a heart-melting and dazzling smile as Grace promptly adopted the same position.

"Yes," she just said. As in, You got it.

"With me," Olivia urged in return.

“Yes.”

Fused together and wide open, eyes locked on each other's and not once breaking contact, they rocked into oblivion. Olivia felt the surge. Grace's eyes, fever-bright, told her she was getting there too. She cupped her breasts. She felt her. Watched that long and lean dancer's body ripple like liquid fire.

“Grace!” she gasped, in awe.

“More,” her lover demanded. “More! Don't stop.”

Olivia met her demanding mouth for a passionate kiss. She didn't know how long she could hold off... They built and built, torrid friction and nothing else between them but raw desire and perfect connection. The sheer power of the orgasm that finally overtook them elicited a single fierce cry out of Grace. Just the sound of it might have been enough to make Olivia come. She stopped breathing and could have sworn that all time did too. Waves of heat radiated. She could no longer tell which part of the orgasm was hers or Grace's. She felt it, their bodies, as one. In the aftermath, it brought tears to her eyes. Oh my God... She knew, with utmost clarity, that her life would never be the same again.

chapter 20

It took Olivia a moment to remember where she was when she opened her eyes the next morning. She smiled as it came back to her, stretched, and turned over to snuggle close to her partner. Or at least that was the plan... She found the bed empty, and the room as well.

“Grace?”

No answer. She was not in the bathroom either. Wondering, low-key worried, Olivia

gnawed on her lip. Surely, Grace had not just...Left?Then the door flew open, bringing a swirl of icy air into the room. As Olivia clung to her blanket, in strode her lover. Grace carried a brown bag in one hand, her laptop in the other, and a blazing smile on her lips. Color rode high in her cheeks and her eyes positively sparkled. One look was like little darts of heat fired into her. Olivia stared, enthralled.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” she croaked.

Grace pushed the door shut with her foot, dropped the bag on the desk, and pulled two tall cups out of it. “Turns out there’s good coffee to be found in Dodger. I got you white, one sugar.”

“Yes, that is how I take my coffee.”

“Uh-huh. Thought so.”

“You take yours black?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Thought so too.” Or shot straight into her bloodstream via IV, probably... Olivia glanced at the laptop. “Have you been working?”

“They have way better Wi-Fi at the coffee place than here. I handled a couple of meetings and made a few key calls. We’re looking good.”

And the clock on the bedside table only read 07:22. Olivia groaned.

“Are you always this energetic in the morning?”

“Of course.” Grace blasted her another high-intensity smile. “That’s what mornings are for, aren’t they? I take it you’re more of a night owl?”

“Uhm... No, not really, but...”

Before Olivia could get her brain in gear, Grace came to sit on the side of the bed. She took off her thin leather gloves, rested her fingers on her cheek, and finally acknowledged the obvious. “Are these just special circumstances?”

“Special.” Olivia nodded, her cheek tingling nicely. “Yeah, you could say that. Grace...”

She pulled her down for a slow, soft kiss. Grace's lips were cool and fresh from the outside, with just a hint of black coffee on her mouth. She tasted amazing. Olivia felt all that restless energy, the power that had been revving so high only a second before, go beautifully still and peaceful. Grace lingered into the kiss, then just rested with her forehead touching hers and her eyes closed.

"You are special," she murmured.

Olivia ran her fingers gently through her hair. "So are you, Ms. Michaels."

She found that 'darling' or 'babe' did not come to her in that instant. But she could infuse enough affection and intimacy into that, 'Ms. Michaels', both to satisfy herself and know that Grace would not be put off by it. Something told Olivia to take it slow and be careful with her today. That her lover might need a bit of time and space to process the amazing night they had shared. And me, too...No rush seemed like an all-around good idea at this point.

"I'm going to take a shower," she announced.

"Okay. Here, this is for you."

As well as organizing her business empire and finding her excellent coffee, Grace had also managed to buy a few essentials. Namely, toiletries and fresh underwear. Before first light, in a random town called Dodger, it was no small feat. She took care of things, obviously, which Olivia decided was another hugely attractive quality about her. Last but not least, she learned that Grace had reported the previous night's threatening encounter to the local police.

"I was going to suggest we do that before we leave," Olivia approved. "We got off lightly, but it might save another woman the same treatment."

“Exactly.”

Grace did not follow her into the shower. Taking it slow, Olivia reminded herself. And it was fine. She wanted to drive, which was fine too, and no surprise. But Olivia did not expect her to launch into a series of 360-degree turns in the middle of the busy Motel parking lot. She made the Mustang’s engine roar, pulverized a bunch of snow, and had her literally shrieking with laughter.

“Next-level up from handbrake turns.”

“Phew! Next-level, yeah!”

Grace flashed her a penetrating look. “I will teach you. If you want.”

It occurred to Olivia that this may be her way of telling her there would be another time. Her heart jolted at the thought, and it settled her a great deal.

“Okay.” She spoke in the same tone and added a promise of her own. “I’ll hold you to that.”

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Grace barely stopped to eat and sleep over the next five days. The resort needed a lot of work, but she was limited in terms of time she wanted to spend. She flew in top business consultants, performed design assessments herself, and spent more time in her hologram tool than in the real world. She spoke personally to each member of staff on every level of the business and made hard recommendations to her siblings about keeping, hiring, and firing. Or rather, she discussed all these things with Chloe and Mark, who were on board with her ideas for modernization and appreciative of her philosophy regarding the restructuring.

“Is Jeremy not going to participate in this at all?” she asked, irritated.

“No.” Her sister sounded extremely sure. “To be honest, Grace, the only reason he added his signature to the contract is because Father told him to.”

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Grace almost dropped her coffee mug.

“Father?” Her voice was dry.

“Yeah. He flew into a right rage when I shared your initial assessment of the situation with him, what with Reece’s antics and all the rest.” Chloe winced in dismay but, to her credit, went on with the truth. “He said he hadn’t worked his butt off all his life for his idiot children to let the business sink into the ground. He asked to review your proposal. Next thing you know, Jeremy makes a big U-Turn and signs off on it. So...”

So, her father agreed with her plan of action. It was a first, Grace reflected. And assumed from the way her sister spoke of him that she did not know of his illness.

“What about Reece?” she asked.

“At home. Sulking. I don’t know what’s going on with him but it’s concerning.”

It was, and Grace was determined to get to the bottom of it. She drove to his house, only to find he was not there. So much for Chloe’s crap intel.

“Goddammit.” She stood on the front porch, debating what to do. It was getting late, and freezing cold once again. She was tired. Surprisingly, he called her right at this moment. “Reece!”

“Hey, sister. Heard you were back in town.”

“I’m at your house. Where the hell are you?”

“In a ditch.”

“What?”

“I crashed my car.”

“Fuck.” Her blood went cold. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Fine. Just... Can you come get me?”

“Tell me where you are,” she snapped. As if I have nothing else to do but rescue everybody! “Alright. I’m on my way.”

As it was, he had described the situation accurately. His car had slipped into the ditch but, fortunately, did not hit anyone else or a tree on the way down.

“Hi.” He greeted her with reddened eyes, and that look on his face she remembered from when he was still a young kid and needed her to fix something stupid he’d done before it came to the attention of their father. “Thanks for coming.”

“What happened? Were you drunk?”

“No.”

“High on something?”

“No, no. A deer shot out in front of me. I over-corrected to avoid it, lost traction on a patch of ice, and fell in.”

She sorted out a tow truck, since apparently it never crossed his mind to get one, and told the guy to take the car to his house. She said they'd be there. Then she drove her brother home, sat him down in front of the fire, and made him a stiff cup of coffee. She sat on the low table in front of him. Getting in his face, pretty much.

“So. Talk to me,” she instructed.

Surprisingly, he did not need too much prompting. “I feel like shit. I’m ashamed. I—”

“Did you hurt these women, Reece? Did you assault them?”

She cut him off, thinking if he said yes, she wasn’t sure she could handle the horrific truth of it. He sighed, deep and heavy, and shook his head.

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“No, Grace, I am not.” Firm now. Sure. He looked her in the eye. “I came on to them hard. I suppose, psychologically, it was hurtful...”

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“You suppose.” She rubbed the throbbing ache across her forehead. “Jesus, Reece.”

“Look, they weren’t hurt is what I am saying. But that’s the way their lawyer will spin it. They’re after a bunch of dollars.” He sighed again. “Hell, they deserve it. And an apology. I was a total asshole.”

“Are you on drugs?”

“No. Not now. Not this week. I quit.”

“Really?” she challenged aggressively.

“Yeah.” He made a vague gesture as if it were the least of his worries. “Look, it all got on top of me. But I am over it now.”

Grace shoved to her feet, knowing there was more he was not saying, and irritated beyond belief. She needed to get at the deeper truth, so she opted to play the ‘cruel to be kind’ card.

“I’ll tell you what I think happened,” she stated. “You got your heart broken by your Russian girlfriend. She dumped you, and you lost your shit. Resorted to drugs and violence to make you feel better. Did you think that’s how real men deal with their issues?” She poked him hard in the chest. “Because I’ll tell you, Reece: you’ve lost your goddamn mind if that’s what you believe.”

He stared at her with his mouth open and a look of absolute disbelief plastered across his face. Then, incredulously, he broke into a smile. And started to laugh.

“Reece.” She frowned, close to fuming. “How could you be so damn stupid? You think this is funny?”

“No, no.” But he went on laughing, harder, to the point of tears streaming down his face.

“Reece,” she repeated, at a loss now. “What the hell...”

When she went to sit back next to him, he grabbed hold of her affectionately. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a tight hug. His crazy, wild laughter turned to real tears.

“I can’t believe you don’t know.”

“What?” she prompted in growing concern. “Don’t tell me you’re sick, or—”

“No, no. Not sick. Grace.” He pulled back to meet her eyes. Gave her a heart-breaking smile that reminded her once more of when he was a child. “I’m gay, you know?”

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Well.Hell!It was a shock. She hadn’t known. Never suspected a thing. He told her everything. How every so-called girlfriend from his past, including the Russian partner, was just a massive lie. A smoke cover. And of course, he’d not asked her to marry him! This was just a rumor the family made up that he had gone along with.

“It’s been hard... The last couple of years, especially, to keep it all in. And quiet like that. To carry on pretending to be someone else.”

“I bet it was.” The thought of a hot, tight, and nasty closet, with all the emotional

shredding that maintaining this kind of double life entailed, made her teeth ache. “Excruciating.”

“Yeah. That’s a good word for it.”

“But... Why?” She did not hide her astonishment.

He gave her a long, sad look. “I saw what happened to you, Grace. It scared me. Turned me into a coward, you might say. I’m well aware of that.”

She did not say. Just let him carry on.

“I was afraid to take the risk. To be different. I didn’t want to have to deal with Mom, Dad, and Jeremy. You were already gone by then, traveling abroad for your dancing, when I realized I was attracted to men.”

She almost asked why he had not told her. Confided in her at the time. Asked for help and guidance. For God’s sake! But he’d just said it. You were gone. She tried not to feel it as an accusation, because she knew it wasn’t said as one. And to be fair, yeah; her own coming-out story was a shocker. She massaged her fingers over her left temple as the headache moved around that way.

“I’m sorry, Reece.” Still felt the need to say it.

He took her hand, flashed another smile, and, suddenly, he was back. The younger brother she’d always felt a strong bond with. The gentle guy she knew and loved. Maybe it was the gay thing between them.

“Don’t be sorry. I didn’t want to be that guy, so it’s all on me. I refused to look at it and to accept myself as a gay man. I pushed it way down. Just tried to be more like Jeremy.”

She looked him in the eye hard and snarled, “What the hell would you want to do that for?”

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“Yeah.” This made him chuckle. “Told you I was confused, eh.” He grew somber. “I was drunk and trying to play macho. I was an asshole to these women and I want to apologize. I will. What I did was stupid. And wrong.”

“For sure. This isn’t you, Reece, this macho type.”

“I know. And now I need to sort out this whole mess. Will you help me?”

chapter 21

Of course, she would. And already knew how.

“We’ll speak to your lawyer. Get him to set up a meeting so you can speak to your accusers and apologize properly. Then you won’t feel like a coward, which I know you are not.”

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“Then I’ll find you a good therapist, and a personal trainer as well.”

“A PT?” He looked surprised.

“Yes. Mind and body for a holistic approach.” She paused and considered briefly. “How would you like to come to Miami and spend time with me? I could find you a job with my company if you’re up for a bit of hard work.”

He hugged her again as gratitude flooded his face. “You bet I’m up for it! And a

change of environment too. Jeremy will have a fit, but...”

“He’ll live. It’s about time you moved out from under his circle of influence.”

“I believe so. Grace, thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “This won’t be a vacation. I expect you to earn your keep in the job and work hard on yourself outside of it. No drugs. No alcohol.”

“Fine. I’m ready. I won’t let you down.”

“You got someone?”

“Someone?”

“A guy, Reece.”

“Uh. No.” He blushed like a well-ripe tomato. “I did, once. But it didn’t work. He was out to everyone he knew, and I didn’t want to be.”

“Alright. Well, you’re still young. There’s time for this sort of thing yet. Okay?”

“Okay.” He rubbed his eyes and flashed her a tired smile. “I’m all out of juice.”

“But you feel better. Yes?”

“Oh yeah. Hell of a lot better.”

“Welcome to the light, brother,” she told him.

Fatigue and guilt hit her on the drive back to Red Falls. For sure, Reece was a grown man. And there was never, not under any circumstance, any excuse for bullying a woman. Grace had been crystal clear with him on that. It was also obvious now that he had been on a downward slide for some time. Years! And she hated the fact that she had not been there to support him. Then again...

“He never asked until today,” she muttered.

And who could blame her for staying away and cutting all ties when every bloody interaction with her family was always so charged with hostility? Still, she felt for the young man that he had been, struggling on his own and too confused to reach out. Grace parked in front of her aunt’s house, cut the engine, and sat for a while with her eyes closed. Mulling it over. After a while, a soft knock on the passenger side window made her look. Expecting Charlie, she fell instead into a pair of large, smiling dark eyes. Olivia...Her heart rate shot up. She disengaged the locks.

“Hello, Ms. Michaels! How are you?”

“Not too bad. I was just having a think.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Olivia dropped onto the seat and shut the door behind her. “We saw you out the window. Charlie sent me to drag you in. I’m going to kiss you.”

“Are you now?”

“Yeah.”

Grace secretly enjoyed Olivia's taking the initiative and the way Olivia cradled her jaw as she leaned in. The kiss was warm and surprisingly intimate—easy and comfortable. When Olivia pulled back, too soon for her own taste, Grace grabbed hold of her by the collar of her sweater. She kept her close and took her mouth for a longer and deeper kiss.

“Right back atcha,” she murmured.

“Yeah.” Olivia chuckled. “Hi.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch. Had to deal with urgent business stuff, family drama... I haven’t had a minute to breathe since we got back from Ottawa.”

“That’s okay, I understand.” Yet Olivia held her gaze, and obviously waited her out.

Grace did not hold back.

“You have to know... I don’t do relationships.”

“Like you warned me you don’t bottom very well.” Olivia’s smile widened.

“Gotcha.”

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No.” These gorgeous eyes grew earnest. “Just using humor to protect myself against how devastated I’m going to feel if you tell me the other night was a mistake. And that we’re done, you and me.”

She was right. It was exactly what Grace had been planning to tell her. But now...

“Are you always so open and honest?” she asked.

“Yes.” Olivia shrugged. “What would be the point of faking it through life?”

“You should talk to my brother.”

“Oh? Well—”

“Look.” Grace raised a hand to stop her from getting sidetracked. “I’ll be honest with you as well. I don’t think the other night was a mistake. Number one.”

“Okay.” Olivia held her breath.

“Two, I like you.” Heart starting to race a bit at the blatant admission.

“Oh, gosh!” Olivia exhaled sharply in relief. “I like you too, Grace. A hell of a lot!” She grinned. “I wouldn’t have slept with you otherwise.”

“Yeah. And I can’t make any promises. I won’t.”

Olivia nodded. Several seconds of silence followed, during which she just stared, before asking. “Is that all?”

“That’s all, yes.”

Olivia had said it herself: no point in faking it. Or forcing things, Grace might add. It was all she could realistically give at the moment. Her anxiety simmered just admitting to the fact that she did like her. A hell of a lot. The other night, far from being a mistake, had been some kind of a miracle for her. No need for play, no dominant games... No 'Call me Mistress' and 'On your knees'. Grace had only yearned for genuine connection. She had wanted to make love to the woman. Jesus... Make love! And it was amazing. Since then, she had spent time rationalizing, minimizing, and putting everything into perspective. Getting cold, and ready to let go, according to her standard MO. Now she just sat as hammers pounded on her skull and waited for Olivia's reaction to her stern assessment. Would the woman understand? What would she say? As it turned out, not a lot. But her reaction spoke volumes. Olivia leaned close for another soft brush of the lips. She smiled. Nodded toward the house.

"Charlie's going to wonder what we're doing. Ready to go in and get warm?"

"Yes."

"You should take something for that headache."

"How do you know I—" Grace started before catching the look in Olivia's eyes. A mix of warmth, compassion, and pure affection, all rolled into one. Something else, too? She noticed it for sure, but could not go there. "Guess it must be obvious," she muttered instead.

"No, you hide it very well." Another smile, a patient look. "But I can see."

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Outside, Olivia took her hand. Again, without asking. Okay, okay... Grace wasn't too sure about holding hands in front of her aunt. Charlie and her loving enthusiasm... It could be too much, and she was in no mood for pointed questions. But it was fine this time. Charlie clocked the contact as they walked in together, beamed a megawatt smile, and directed the way into the kitchen, where all the action seemed to be taking place.

“We’re making vegan stew, darling Grace.”

“Ah. Smells great.”

Olivia poured some wine and whispered in Charlie's ear. A glass of water and a headache pill magically appeared in front of her. Still, with no probing questions or undue attention. Grace took off her jacket, and she sat at the table as Charlie went back to stirring a big pot on the stove. Michael Bublé was singing about Christmas in the background. Two happy dogs snoozed in a basket in the corner of the room. Olivia flashed her a lingering smile. This is the feel of home, Grace decided. Welcoming, warm... Safe. And Olivia was a part of making it so. Grace swallowed the pill, sipped her wine, and watched her chop a bunch of herbs. Handy with a kitchen knife. Chef skills. She wore threadbare jeans, thick red socks with little white snowflakes on them, and a lumberjack shirt reminiscent of the one she had on the first time they met. Olivia Bianchi-style through and through. Grace observed her thoughtfully. The outfit struck her as incredibly sexy this time around.

“You two need any help with the cooking?” she asked.

“It’s almost done,” Charlie declared, then clearly could not resist reminding her of the

one time she'd made a potato explode in the microwave. "It went off like a hand grenade," she said, and Olivia laughed.

"In my defense, you never told me I had to stab it to death first."

"Best if you leave the cooking to us," Charlie grinned. "You just relax now, honey."

"I'll second that," Olivia said with another long, warm look.

"Okay." For once in her life, Grace found it actually wasn't so hard to comply.

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"There, it's happening again. She clicks her fingers and you go. Or rather," Dana pointed out, "she sends the ticket, and you fly off."

"Well, it's not like she's forcing me." Olivia grinned at her friend. "Thanks for the ride to the airport, by the way."

"That's fine. But she paid for your flight?"

"It was a surprise. So, yeah, she did."

"Hmm."

"Be happy for me, Dana," Olivia said. "Aren't you the one who kept saying I should get back in the saddle?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure about this particular horse."

"Oh, gosh. Her name is Grace, okay? And be more specific."

“Specifically, Olivia, Grace is absolutely not your usual type. She’s older, powerful, a business tycoon who thinks nothing of sending you a plane ticket to Florida for the weekend.”

“I know. Great, huh?” Olivia beamed, intentionally teasing.

“If you say so. But you know what I mean.”

“Not sure I do, to be honest.”

Dana flashed her a sobering glance. “Well, to put it bluntly, I think you’re biting off more than you can chew with this one. Which would be a regular occurrence for you, actually.”

“Talk about blunt, uh. And hurtful too.”

“I don’t mean to be, babe. You know that.” Dana squeezed her shoulder in a soothing gesture. “I just think she’s too much. Too mighty. Too experienced for you.”

“When is experience not a good thing?” Olivia shrugged in light irritation. “Yeah, she’s older. Fourteen years in between us. Not a big deal as far as I’m concerned. And she’s a designer. An artist, just like me. Anyway, I’m still single, right? Sticking with my regular type isn’t likely to get me anywhere.”

“Fair enough,” Dana was forced to concede.

“Yeah. And I didn’t choose. You know I wasn’t looking for a new relationship. Attraction happens or it doesn’t. With us...” She smiled. “It sizzled from the start.”

“I just worry she’s a control freak who’ll take advantage of the situation and easily manipulate you.”

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“Give me a break, D. I’m not a total idiot.”

“I never said that.”

“You think I’m too soft.”

“Well.” Dana’s expression turned fondly exasperated. “You can be. A little too nice, too trusting, and it comes back to bite you on the ass.”

“She did.”

“What?”

“Bite me on the ass.” Olivia laughed. “I loved it.”

“You slept with her?” Dana all but shrieked.

“When we got stuck the other day, yes.” Olivia did soften at the memory. “She opened up to me. Her past made her tough and resilient. She likes to be in control, you’re right. But I like her power and authority. She takes no shit from anyone, and why should she? Underneath it all, she’s also warm and funny, kind and caring. Vulnerable, and deeply emotionally switched on. It’s beautiful.”

This time, Dana’s glance was loaded with resignation. “Too late to warn you off, by the sound of it.”

“Too late,” Olivia said firmly. “But thanks for looking after me, even though it can be

irritating as hell sometimes.”

“That’s what best friends are for.”

“Yes. I don’t take you for granted, D. And your babysitting Everett for me yet again.”

“Then show me your appreciation.”

“How?”

Olivia groaned, wary again, but her friend broke into a mischievous grin. “How was the sex in Dodger? Ass-biting, eh? You’ve got to tell me more about that!”

chapter 22

In her high-rise, kick-ass, business tycoon office, the powerful, older, wiser woman stabbed the intercom button on her desk for the third time in under an hour.

“Is she here yet?”

“Not yet, Ms. Michaels.” Libby was wise enough herself not to let any impatience she may feel at the constant interruptions pierce through her reply. “I will let you know the very second Ms. Bianchi arrives in the building, as instructed.”

“Right.”

Grace frowned at her watch and she stood up again to pace the office. She’d tried to work but simply could not concentrate. Lack of focus due to impatience... Since when did she—Don’t. She stopped abruptly as she remembered the last time she had felt this way. Happy... Excited. It was on that fateful Christmas Eve, of course. There had not been a cloud on her horizon as she prepared to meet her girlfriend. It was

their first Christmas as a couple. They'd been on the edge of coming out and spending the rest of their lives together. How much she had wanted it...Stop, Grace repeated to herself. The past was over and gone now. She owed it to herself and Olivia to dwell in the present. Though another glance at her watch made her wonder if it were broken. For Christ's sake! Had her driver decided to detour via the West Coast on his way back from the airport? Then...

"Ms. Michaels," Libby called. "Your guest has arrived and is on her way up."

"Send her in ASAP." Grace was not going to greet her lover in the main office in front of curious staff.

A couple of minutes later, Libby finally knocked and ushered Olivia in. Alright...Grace held back on a purr of satisfaction at the sight of her in tight black jeans, polished boots, and a white Henley that made it pretty obvious she must be bra-less underneath. She's gorgeous.

"Is there anything else you—"

"That's it." Grace waved Libby off.

"Thanks," Olivia told the PA, who smiled at her in polite acknowledgment. She turned to Grace as the door closed softly behind her assistant and raised an amused eyebrow. "Hey, that was rude."

"What was?"

"Cutting her off like that. Dismissing her with such a casual wave."

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“What was I supposed to do?” Grace smirked. “Bow?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Olivia said with a chuckle. “Maybe just nod. Anyway.” Her eyes softened. “Hello, Ms. Michaels.”

“Hi.” Grace stepped up close. “How was your flight?”

“It was—”

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Before she could say, Grace flashed a brilliant smile of her own and cut her off in style. Olivia found herself backed up tight against the door. Smooth hot lips latched onto hers, teasing her into opening her mouth. Not that she needed much prompting. Warm hands slid under her shirt to tickle her ribs. Olivia would have smiled, but she did not have time as Grace moved to her breasts, fast and sure. She cupped her in both hands, fondled her enticingly, and rubbed her thumbs over her already erect nipples.

“I knew it,” she declared with a hint of triumph.

“Uh—what?”

“No bra. For me?”

“Ah. Yes... I—” Olivia gasped when Grace swallowed her words with another heated kiss.

This time it was deep, slow, possessive. It almost blew the top of her head off. Good thing she had the door at her back for support, really, or she might have dropped. Her knees had turned to water, and Grace apparently was intent on inducing oxygen deprivation. Even so, Olivia was sorely disappointed when the kiss stopped.

“Wow.” She panted. Blinked. Chuckled. “Wow...”

“Hmm.” Grace caressed her cheek with a sexy, almost feline smile. She traced a smooth finger across her lips and gave her a quick, mischievous lick. “I’ll say.”

Charmed, her heart racing from the kiss, her touch, and just the sheer pleasure of being close to her again, Olivia looked at her. Blue eyes pulsing with... What? Joy? Desire? Wickedness? All three, she decided. And wondered what Dana might make of Grace’s entrancing welcome. Olivia knew for sure that she loved it.

“Missed me?” she asked.

“I did,” Grace answered. “You look surprised.”

“A little. I thought I might have to tease it out of you.”

“And how would you do that?”

“Very well. Want me to show you?”

“Why not?”

“Okay.” Olivia grinned. “Maybe later then.”

She relished the sound of Grace’s laughter, loved catching that flash of appreciation in her eyes at this little tease. It was great to know she had missed her too. Though

they'd only been apart for ten days, Olivia had felt every minute of the separation.

"How's work been?" Grace inquired as she walked across her office space, taking it all in.

"Great." Olivia nodded. "Managed to get ahead of schedule on a new project, so I can enjoy being here this weekend without a hint of guilt." She spread her arms wide in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. "Phew! Look at this awesome view!"

Behind her, Grace made another low and sexy approving sound. "Oh, I am. The city's not bad either."

With a smile, Olivia turned back to her. Grace looked every inch the commanding executive in a flowing black pantsuit and mint-green silk blouse. Needle-like heels and a flash of black bra, perfect hair, and subtle makeup, highlighted natural good looks that required very little extra.

"You're not bad yourself."

"Glad you think so."

"Grace..."

Forgetting her resolve to tease her by playing hard to get, Olivia closed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around her neck, holding her, and silently asking to be held at the same time.

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“I’m here,” Grace murmured. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. But I did miss you. A lot.”

Dammit. Olivia had promised herself on the way over here to lay off the mush. She knew instinctively that being too candid, too quickly, might put Grace off. Yes, they’d grown very close in the past few weeks. Grace had flown over to Red Falls frequently to spend time with Charlie and see to business at the resort. She insisted on keeping a room at the hotel, though Olivia had spent all but one of the nights with her there. Might as well stay at my house... But she understood her lover’s need for independence, so she did not offer. It was that control thing again. Once or twice when they were together, and intimate, she had felt her hesitation. A touch of reluctance. It seemed that her inner battle was still going on. Strength vs vulnerability... Intimacy vs freedom. Of course, she could have both. Olivia did not want to push too hard and make her think otherwise. She was aware that she could be intense in matters of relationship. Committed. All in. The U-Haul lesbian of her ex-partner’s nightmares.

“It’s alright.” Grace kept her close with one arm around her waist. With her free hand, she brushed her fingers through her hair and caressed her cheek. “We can be honest with each other. I told you I appreciate this in you.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to be too much.”

“Nonsense.” Grace flashed that cocky grin again. “Who said that to you? That you’re too much?”

“Um... My ex,” Olivia admitted.

“Well, you’re with me now. I can take it.”

Can you really? Olivia stared, feeling her own heart about to burst. Did Grace mean the other part? You’re with me now... Did she mean it the way Olivia understood it? Wary of breaking her promise not to make things heavy for the second time, she did not push for specifics. The woman had just told her again; she appreciated her honesty. And Grace did not lie or fake it either. So, Olivia accepted another kiss, meant to soothe and reassure. She smiled in return and hugged her tight.

“Are you very busy?”

“I’ve cleared this weekend for us,” Grace announced. “Just thought if you came to the office first, I could show you my holographic design program.”

“Oh, I would love that!” Olivia exclaimed.

She had been dying to experience the tool since Grace had first mentioned it to her. And what a treat it was to stand in the middle of the room, call out any features, styles, or textures she wanted to see, and have them materialize right in front of her eyes!

“This is great!” she declared eventually.

“Well, yeah.” Grace shrugged. “I created it.”

Olivia could sense her amusement, the smug, playful smile under the arrogance on show. She felt her softer side, bubbling humor, qualities people must often miss. Grace seemed to intentionally hide these endearing traits.

“I hope this is patented?” she prompted.

“Of course.”

“Are you going to commercialize it?”

“I might. Little busy with other ventures at the moment.”

“You’d make millions,” Olivia observed and watched that smug, attractive smile flash once more on Grace’s lips.

“Already have plenty. So.” She wrapped her arms around her and kissed her on the lips. “What would you like to do here this weekend?”

“Spend time with you. I haven’t thought about much else.”

“That’s it? You’re easily pleased,” Grace commented when Olivia nodded.

“Are you pleased?”

That look again was deep and thoughtful, with just a touch of wonder, as if Grace had analyzed her own thoughts carefully before speaking and might have been a little surprised at what she discovered. But her answer came quickly, all the same, and with a beautiful smile.

“Yes, I’m very happy you took the time. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Grace grabbed her phone and keys off her desk. Then, after a brief hesitation, took her hand in hers and led her out across the main office. No one dared to gawk and stare at them directly, but Olivia noted more than a few curious furtive glances aimed in their direction.

“Libby,” Grace said, prompting her assistant to rush to her side.

“Yes, Ms. Michaels.”

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“I’ll be off-comm until Monday. Only contact me in case of an emergency.”

“Got it.” The woman could not stop her eyes flashing down to their entwined hands. She seemed fascinated.

“Any questions?” Grace almost dared her to ask.

Libby’s gaze snapped up in a hurry. “None whatsoever, Ms. Michaels. Ms. Bianchi.” She nodded to her. “Enjoy your weekend.”

“You too,” Olivia told her.

She felt the eager eyes of the entire office on their back as they headed to the elevator. Grace burst out laughing as soon as the doors closed behind them. “Well, that was fun.”

“You like teasing your people.”

“Sometimes I do, yes.”

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It seemed obvious, but Olivia appeared unsure. Grace surprised herself by how much she wanted to make her position clear.

“You know how it is.” She nodded. “People are always very curious about their boss’s private life. This will provide excellent water cooler gossip.”

“I suppose.” Olivia chuckled. “Especially when the big boss does not follow the traditional model, uh?”

“Correct. And even more so because I hate gossip about my personal life. I don’t make it a habit to stroll through the office holding hands with my lover.”

Understanding dawned, sheepish pleasure bringing color to Olivia’s cheeks. Finding it increasingly difficult not to hold her when they were close, Grace pulled her back into her arms.

“I’ve never done this, in fact. You are a first, Olivia.”

“I’m so glad... This weekend is a first for me too. I rarely feel inclined to drop everything; work, puppy, and any other commitments, to jump on a plane and travel to another state for a mini-vacation.”

“Don’t you?”

“Absolutely not. My friend Dana will tell you that I’m always reluctant to take a break from home and work. I just never feel the need, you know?”

“You love your life. And your work is your passion.”

“Totally. It takes a special woman to lure me away.”

Grace experienced a quick flutter in her stomach, a touch of the usual anxiety at this frank admission. But only for an instant, before joy and excitement flooded back.

“We’ll take it easy this weekend,” she promised. “And also make it count. Sound good?”

“It sounds perfect!”

Miami was an art’s lover paradise. From splendid museums to cutting-edge art installations, and quirky neighborhoods filled with eclectic street murals, the city had it all. And Grace knew all the best spots. They stopped at the new Helix in Wynwood, the area’s first luxury hotel. The complex also housed works by Splash Collective co-founders Alessia Allengro and Jon Milacci, and an exhilarating exterior mural by Miami-based artist, Elyos.

“Very esoteric,” Olivia commented and went still when she noticed the dizzying contrast with the entrance lobby. “Ruthless minimalism in here.”

“Do you approve?”

“Definitely.”

chapter 23

Grace watched her eyes wander with interest over razor-sharp lines and cool edges, exotic greenery to bring a natural balance to almost industrial order and precision, and tiny water fountains hidden in unlikely corners.

“This is a real feast for the senses. It strikes me as a mix of Japanese influence and Miami vibe.”

“You’re quite right, yes.”

“And the paintings on the far wall,” Olivia pointed. “Vivid splashes of color to tantalize the eye... Very abstract shapes but, clearly, these are dancing couples. Cuban?”

“Indeed,” Grace approved. “That’s the Miami vibe you can feel.”

“It’s warm. Effortlessly sensual. Yin and Yang with the rest of the space. It feels calm but also stimulating.” Olivia flashed a delighted smile. “I love this space. It’s very you.”

“I’m glad you do. I designed it.”

“Really? Wow!”

It occurred to Grace in that instant that no amount of praise in specialist magazines, awards, or millions in the bank, indeed, could ever again make her feel as good as Olivia’s beaming smile of admiration.

“I love the words you use to describe it,” she let her know. “You picked up on all the things I wanted to achieve and delivered a keen assessment. This is the mark of a talented woman, and a gifted artist as well.”

In the middle of the lobby, Olivia’s smile suddenly turned wicked and she came to throw both arms around her neck.

“No longer such a baby dyke, am I?”

“Ah.” Grace had to laugh at the reminder. “No longer. But I never meant it as an insult. And you are still attractively butch.”

“You like that?” Olivia sounded deliciously amazed.

“Might do.” Grace winked.

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The weekend went by in a blur. A pleasurable interlude filled with all the things she had grown quietly, uncharacteristically excited about sharing with Olivia during the week. She took her to SuperBlue first off, with its digital walls of blooming flowers, amazing waterfalls, and mazes of glass. In front of the flickering lights that were supposed to record and respond to viewers’ heartbeats, without a care for the other people around them, she grabbed her for a passionate kiss. And thoroughly enjoyed the ensuing result.

“It works,” she approved, and Olivia chuckled.

“Does it?” she argued sweetly. “Let’s try it again just to be sure.”

They dined at the ever-popular A-KO Miami, an upscale Korean barbecue restaurant, and finished in South Beach at the Bachata dance club.

“You’re really good at this,” Grace complimented. “Smooth and relaxed. And a quick learner.”

“I just love watching you move. And to have an excuse to rub against you.” Olivia wiggled her eyebrows. “All very basic, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be so modest. You’re very good, end of.”

“Okay!” She laughed. “And you’re a great teacher.”

“As for the other stuff, no excuse required. In fact, let’s go home now. I’d love to rub against you without clothes getting in the way.”

Olivia was wearing the set of new clothes she had bought her for the occasion, because Grace wanted her to enjoy the full experience of Bachata. So, now, there was the added pleasure of peeling her new hipster trousers off her strong legs and ripping open the tight bodice that went with it. The night was steamy and playful. It shifted into a long sensual shower the next morning, after which they shared a lazy breakfast on the terrace, with views of the Gulf in the distance.

“How about a drive?” Grace suggested.

“Oooh!” Olivia licked her lips at the sight of the gleaming Ferrari. “When you said you had one of these, I was pretty sure she would be red.”

“Oh yeah? How come?”

“Hot and sexy.” Olivia winked. “Just like you.” She went on as her lover snorted ironically. “Can I do handbrake turns in this?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

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“You’re not ruining my tires on hard asphalt. Or sinking the handbrake system for that matter.”

“But it was okay to do in the Mustang?” Olivia challenged.

“The hire company has a budget for it.”

“Really? They do?”

“Of course.” Grace had no idea, and probably not, hey...

But she enjoyed watching Olivia’s gorgeous eyes widen in astonishment and making her laugh. They strolled hand in hand through the streets of Little Havana, stopped for coffee, and explored a bustling artisan market they discovered on a side street. Then finished at Cafe La Trova, known for its delicious Cuban food, exotic cocktails, and Live Music. Toward the end of the meal, shared tapas and mojito criollo, Olivia slid a small jewelry box across the table.

“What’s this?”

“For you, Grace.” Olivia smiled. “Open it.”

In the box was a cute silver bracelet with five little stars engraved on it.

“Oh...”

“I bought it when you were talking to the glass maker at the market.”

Grace looked at the bracelet, back at her, and slowly raised an eyebrow. She was inexplicably moved and wanted to give herself time to digest.

“What’s the occasion?”

“Souvenir of a wonderful weekend.”

“Hmm.” Impossibly tongue-tied, Grace did not move.

“May I put it on you?” Olivia asked softly.

“Sure.”

She did and smiled in approval. “Perfect. Do you like it?”

“Yes, I... I really do. Thank you., Olivia.”

“And to you. I had a brilliant time.”

“Well.” Grace cleared her throat. “It takes two, of course.”

They went straight home after dinner. Olivia easily took her hand as they entered her spacious home. Grace followed her up the stairs and into the bedroom.

“Are you okay?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You were quiet on the way back.” Olivia locked her arms around her neck, pressing gently into her. Her eyes shone in the moonlight that filled the darkened room. “And I’ve been getting used to you backing me up against doors and walls, ravishing me

with your mouth. So...

“Are you saying I am failing in my duties?” Grace tried for an ironic tone that fell a little flat.

“Not at all.” Olivia kissed her. “I’m just making sure you’re alright.”

With a folded knuckle under her chin, Grace tilted her head back to brush her lips over the underside of her jaw. There was a sensitive spot right there; she had learned, closer to her ear, which always made her lover shiver. This time was no exception, and it elicited the same reaction in her.

“I love how responsive you are.”

“To you,” Olivia murmured. “With you, Grace.”

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“Yes. Tomorrow night, you’ll be home,” Grace added. “And I’m spending the whole of next week in Chicago.”

The Excelsior re-design project was a massive undertaking. It was not going to magically work itself into success while she stayed home and indulged in fine dining and hot sex. Anyway, where was she going with this? So easy to lose the thread...

“I know you’ll be busy.” Olivia raked her fingers through her hair with both hands, eliciting a flurry of sweet tingles down the back of her neck. Such warm fingers... This gentle, and now exquisitely familiar touch. Grace dipped her head forward a tiny bit in reaction. “Are you avoiding answering the question, Ms. Michaels?”

“No. I’m alright. Let’s go to bed.”

She intentionally didn’t take the initiative other than saying this and more or less just prompted Olivia to do it. It seemed her partner required very little to understand what was needed. She lay with her, pulled her into a tight embrace, wrapped one leg in between hers, and hooked her foot behind her ankle. With that, she made her feel anchored—nicely weighted and protected. Grace took a deep breath and exhaled long and steady.

“We can just sleep if you want,” Olivia said.

“No, I don’t want to sleep.”

“Okay.” A quick grin, an easy nod. “Good choice.”

She was hot against her leg.

“You know I’m the dominant type, right?”

“Are you really?” Olivia asked with a disarmingly teasing chuckle. “Well, Ms. Michaels. I may have noticed that about you, yes.”

“I often do a lot more than simply back a partner up against the wall and kiss her.”

“More? Like what?”

“Make her call me Mistress. Tie her to the bed. Spank her.”

“Spanking?” Olivia’s eyebrows shot up and she bit lightly on her lip. “Hmm. I’ve never been spanked. Are you telling me this now because you want to try it with me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh? Because, you know, it would be okay. We could try.”

“Have you ever wanted to do this? Before me?”

“Well. Not really. No,” Olivia admitted. “But I would. With you, it would be okay.”

Grace heard what she might not be saying. For you. Olivia’s trust in her made her heart tighten. She kissed her.

“Maybe. We’ll see. That part is not essential for me.”

“Okay... Fine.”

“I just wanted you to know it’s what I’ve been doing for a few years.” A lot of years. “Sexual play with professional escorts. Easier that way,” she said, catching the question in her eyes. “No ties.”

“Ah, yes.” Olivia smiled, amused. “Other than to the bed.”

“Yeah.” Grace yearned to tell her more but suddenly found that the words just would not come.

What she did feel instead was an expanding ball of anxiety, pressure in the center of her chest, and no idea why it was there. Maybe because it was their last night here and the weekend had been so incredibly perfect. She had enjoyed every second and loved every moment of the connection. Olivia in her office, having fun with the holo tool. Grinning at her on the dance floor. Olivia walking through her house, looking very much at home. Olivia in her bed. Such a monumental change! Grace felt a little dazed by it all. For sure, she did not want this time together to come to an end. Getting too attached? You know you are. Damn. Dammit! She did know, yes. Panic rising, she started to do the same, and move back.

“Grace,” Olivia murmured. She rested a calm hand over her cheek, prompting her to still. “It’s okay. Be with me.”

“I want to, but—”

“Shhh. It’s okay,” Olivia repeated and kissed her again.

Ah... Okay, yes. Okay. Grace found herself melting into that kiss like a drop of ice in hot coffee, forgetting her objections and whatever else had been on her mind to say, to explain, to tell her. Words to rationalize, clarify, hold at bay. Words to deny herself the emotional surrender she craved and refused to acknowledge. Could Olivia guess what was going on inside her mind? Did she instinctively understand the things that

Grace struggled so much to put into words? Well. She certainly kissed her as if she did... And it was just wonderful. Long, easy kisses that made further words irrelevant. Patient strokes and gentle caresses to relax her body and dissolve the remaining tension. Olivia set the pace, and Grace let her. It was peaceful. Languid. There was no urgency in her movements, no rush to inflame or satisfy her own cravings. Arousal built. Slow, steady, and strong.

“Close your eyes. Lie down.”

Grace lay on her back, open and trusting. Simply allowing. Smooth lips over her mouth dispensed soothing kisses. Olivia’s tender mouth enfolded her nipples in a heated lock, making her arch under her caress in greedy pleasure. Trailing kisses all over her breasts, down the length of her torso and abdomen, on the inside of her thighs. Delighting in her exploration, Olivia lit her up from the inside out. Yet, even though pleasure radiated, and Grace was aching for that talented mouth to remain right where it was currently achieving miracles, she had one request.

“I want you with me. Please.”

“Yes.” Olivia kissed her swollen lips and glanced up long enough to flash a devastating smile. “In a minute, I will.”

No one ever said that to her. No one dared make her wait. The fact that Olivia so deliberately told her no, basically, and with that blazing smile, from between her legs, made her brain and other parts of her sizzle. It almost destroyed her on the spot, actually.

“I don’t think I have... a minute,” Grace told her through gritted teeth.

Olivia fixed her with tender eyes and that alluring grin on her wet lips. “You’re so beautiful. It’s okay, Grace. Relax. I’ve got you.”

Now... Now, she trembled. Grace had never even let herself dream of what Olivia was giving to her. Not just sex or pleasure. Not only a tremendous connection, the

kind that scared her half to death and made her want to weep for joy at the same time. But this...It's okay. I've got you.Reassuring words she normally told others. Nobody ever said them back to her because Grace always made damn sure that they knew she did not need or require this kind of thing. She was above it. Too hard, too strong. Invincible. Untouchable.Broken.

“Oh, God.”

Her mind emptied on a generous stroke of velvet tongue. Olivia lapped at her twitching center in exactly the right spot to almost make her scream. Grace gripped the sheets, her fingers clenching and unclenching reflexively. The muscles in her thighs quivered. She groaned.

“Let go,” her lover encouraged.

Even with such exquisite pleasure, even though every inch of her skin was on fire, and she burned to achieve release, Grace hovered on the edge, unable to do it. Orgasms always came easy for her. She never had any issue getting there, and more than once was usually the norm. But what Olivia was urging her to do now... It was something else altogether, and part of her still resisted it.

“I— I can't,” she panted.

“Yes,” Olivia insisted in a whisper. “With me, you can.”

All she did was enter her softly with the tip of her tongue. In and out, gentle pressure. No need for any other stimulation or it would be forcing it, robbing her of choice. Olivia understood how to do this just right, with a steadying arm laced around her waist. To be held close and invited to trust like this... To believe it was safe to do it. Her words were more powerful than fear, the sensations too sweet to hold back. Grace closed her eyes and she let go.

chapter 24

Olivia slid upwards to gather her trembling lover in her arms.

“I’m here.”

“Olivia,” Grace murmured in a husky whisper.

“Yes. Right here.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around her and simply held her in silence for a while. She had felt all that tension. Heard the single sob as Grace let go. She understood what it took to let herself fall wide open. And Dana would be pissed off... Because Olivia knew she was in love. Desperately and irrevocably in love with the mighty Grace Michaels, and so be it. Her friend was just a fleeting thought at this point. Only Grace mattered. The two of them together.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Sure?”

Blue eyes flashed, still glistening with a layer of tears. “Yes. But you tricked me.”

“What?” Olivia chuckled. “No, I certainly—”

“Thank you.” Grace held her gaze, fierce and tender at the same time. “Thank you, Olivia. I think I needed it.” And on these words, she took her mouth in a ferocious kiss.

Oh, Jesus! Startled at the renewed intensity, but definitely all for it, Olivia clung to her.

“You said you wanted to try it my way.”

Once again, mischievous and teasing. And apparently, dead serious all at the same time. Grace sounded like she was back on her A-game, and Olivia laughed in delight at the now gleam of challenge in her eyes.

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

“Did you mean it?”

“Yes,” she answered coyly. “I’ll do my best to satisfy you, Ms. Michaels.”

“This is about compliance. You’ll do what I tell you to do.”

Arousal hit sharp and deep between her legs, making Olivia tighten. This kind of ruthless confidence was such an attractive trait to her... And Grace so easily took charge.

“Okay, I’ll obey you.”

“Good. We’ll see.”

She pressed herself sensuously into her. Rolled her tongue around her erect nipple. She gave it a soft pull and just grazed her teeth over the sensitive skin. Olivia purred in reaction.

“But I am not calling you Mistress. I draw the line at that.”

“Right.” Grace arched an amused eyebrow. “Are you going to be the unruly and disobedient type, then?”

“Ah.” Olivia gasped as she cupped a heated hand precisely between her legs. “Yes?”

“Not sure? You sound conflicted, my dear.”

“Uh... You’re making it really hard to think.”

“You are so wet.” Grace lingered on her nipples, spreading tingles. “So beautiful.”

“Unruly,” Olivia reminded her. “What are you going to do about that?”

“Hmm...” When she moved her leg, Grace shifted on top of her. Pinning her down with the weight of her body, molding her own breasts to hers. So erotic... And the sparkle in her eyes too. Olivia loved having her on top. “Do you think I should punish you?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t we eager all of a sudden, huh?”

“Tell me what you would do,” Olivia demanded.

???

Grace suspected she liked dirty talk more than she would enjoy the real thing. Maybe they could try spanking in the future if Olivia really wanted to. For now, Grace just wanted to lavish simple pleasure, even if no less intense, and bring her to a memorable orgasm. So she spoke low and hot against her ear of all the ways in which she might restrain her, bring her into line, and teach her to be a good girl. She remarked on how slick she was. And how sexy, how much she liked it. She made Olivia moan by softly caressing her and applying the faintest bit of pressure to her swollen clit. Just precise and gentle strokes to make her harden even more.

“You’re all over my fingers, Olivia. Hmm...” Grace with-drew only briefly to lick

one. “You taste delicious.” She gathered a little more evidence of her arousal and offered it to her. “Suck.”

And tried not to lose it when Olivia complied. The sight of her doing that...Spectacular.Her eyes had grown much darker now with need and hunger. She jerked her hips and gave a little whimper, seeking to resume contact. Grace returned her fingers to the inside of her thigh and just stayed there, tantalizingly out of reach.

“Something you want?”

“Touch me!”

“Say please, darling.”

Olivia shuddered, chuckled, and whimpered again. “Please. I need you, Grace. I—”

Grace entered her smoothly with two fingers, stealing the rest of her sentence and making her eyelids flutter wildly.

“Keep your eyes open. Be with me, Olivia.”

“Grace...” She gasped again. “I want to! I want to be with you.”

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“Yes.” Talking about more? Or just about this now? Either way, it wouldn’t change the answer Grace wanted to give. “I am with you,” she murmured. “This if for you now. Take all you need.”

She encouraged Olivia to establish her own rhythm, and she followed her lead. No more games. She stopped talking, too, and used her mouth to cover her splendid body with licks and kisses instead.

“So good.” Olivia locked one arm around her neck, keeping her close and holding on at the same time.

“Nearly there?” Grace murmured. She could feel it.

“Yes. Don’t stop.”

“I won’t. Tell me what you need.”

“Harder.” Olivia tightened her grip. “Stay.”

“All the way, baby.”

“I’m so, so close... Kiss me!”

Grace took her mouth just as she felt the first telling pulse of orgasm tingling over her fingers. She pressed the top of her palm against her clit and rubbed her hard, as her lover wanted. The result was quick and wonderful. Olivia convulsed. She clenched. Grace recaptured her mouth and probed deep with her tongue. As she squeezed

Olivia's leg between her own to keep her from lifting off the bed, she found herself right back on the edge.

"Grace!" Olivia shouted.

Fuck. Grace came with her a second time. Only one word for this sort of connection, she thought dimly as a wave of blissful pleasure spread through her like a burst of sunshine: Glorious. She held her quivering partner until Olivia began to settle and catch her breath. Until the heartbeat Grace could feel pounding enticingly under her skin slowed down a bit. After a while, Olivia stretched contentedly. She smiled and snuggled back into her arms with an amazed chuckle.

"Wow. I'm having aftershocks."

"You're alright then," Grace prompted.

"Hmm... Yeah." Still purring in appreciation. "My legs are gone. It's nice."

"Uh-huh?"

"I feel like melting wax. Might have to lie here a few hours, you know?"

"Well, that's good since we've got the rest of the night to do just that."

"Oh yeah, that's right!" Olivia laughed. "Time... I lost time. For a moment, you even made me forget what planet we're on."

"You're so hot. And gorgeous." Grace lay on her side facing her, smiling at the satiated look on her face. "I need to ask you something."

"You wanna spank me?" Olivia grinned. "I knew it."

“Not just yet.” Grace kissed her gently on the lips.

“Not after two major orgasms in a row, huh?”

“You felt that?”

“Oh yeah.” Olivia kissed her back. “You’re amazing.”

“You too. Now stop interrupting me before I lose my nerve. Or start thinking too hard about this.” Or have myself a little heart attack. Grace decided to blurt it out now and explain the specifics to her later. “Olivia, how would you like to spend Christmas with me and Charlie at the Michaels family home?”

???

Even Dana began to get used to the new order of things.

“I’m going to want to meet this woman of yours real soon if you two start getting cozy,” she remarked.

“You’ll love her,” Olivia promised.

“Do you?”

“Well. Uh. I’m not—”

“In love,” Dana interrupted. “Your goofy grin tells all, so do not try to deny it.” And for once, no complaint followed that observation. Just a tight, warm hug. “Alright, babe. Let me know next time she’s in town and you can come for dinner. Mel would love to see you as well.”

“Okay. I’d like that.”

“Will you be spending Christmas together?”

“That’s the plan. Christmas Day at the family home.”

“Great.” Dana looked pleasantly surprised, and curious as well. “I thought she was at odds with the rest of the Michaels clan?”

“Grace is trying to patch things up with them.”

Though this prompted another approving nod from Dana, who was extremely tight with her own family and struggled at times to imagine any other way, Olivia left it vague. She would not discuss Grace’s private affairs; not even with her best friend. She also knew that things in that relationship were at a delicate stage. Grace had requested to speak to her father ahead of time. He declined, on account of a busy schedule. And let her know, via his secretary, that she and her ‘guest’ would be welcome at the house for Christmas Day. Power games, Olivia thought. Grace agreed,

but she was nonplussed about it.

“It’s good enough,” she stated. And simply warned Olivia that, knowing her family, this wouldn’t be a done deal until they were all sitting down at the table. “Last-minute changes tend to be the norm.”

“Not a problem,” Olivia assured.

She was also prepared for the usual aloofness and another round of radio silence while Grace was away in Chicago. Her single-minded lover, she had learned, worked hard, long hours. She liked to immerse herself in the project at hand and ignore everything else in her world. Olivia understood this very well, actually, since it was typical of an artist’s creative process. Hers, too. So, she was surprised and touched when Grace started to message her at odd times during the day. Sometimes just to say hello. Literally, just ‘Hi’. Or Olivia would get a random photo of her surroundings with a typical comment attached to it. A piece of ugly beige carpet and, ‘Can you believe this horror?’ Or a blurred photo of a snowy street taken from the back of a taxi; ‘On the move – snail’s pace’. Sometimes, a striking piece of design would come through. Like the crisp shadow of a rose over an immaculately white wall, or the sharp angle of a piece of clean marble. Grace’s comments on those varied from a smiling emoji, a wondering face, or a single check mark. The pics were endearing snapshots of her world. The comments revealed her mindset, allowing Olivia into her private musings. In return, she sent her funny photos of her puppy, behind the scenes at a vegan event, or a selfie from her studio following a productive afternoon creating her own stuff. To which Grace replied with: ‘Stunning’, a series of flame emojis, and a panting red face. The message was clear and made Olivia smile. She began to look forward to her late-night phone calls as well. At first, always under the guise of something other than just checking in, as if Grace thought she needed an excuse. Asking her to drop in on Charlie, even though Olivia enjoyed seeing her friend, and never needed any prompting. Or asking for her opinion, which surely Grace did not really need, on a new design idea. Soon enough, all pretense was abandoned and the

calls turned to, 'Hey. How was your day?'

"You'll never guess what happened today," Grace told her that night as Olivia snuggled in bed with her puppy. "I had a vegan meal."

"Yay! Wonderful! You sound astonished."

"Well. Quite."

"What was it?"

"Lasagna. With the funny black stuff instead of mince meat; you know?"

"You mean lentils?"

"Ah. I think it was. Lentils, yeah. I wanted to send you a pic but it didn't look like much on the plate."

Olivia suppressed a chuckle. "Did it taste good at least?"

"Surprisingly. Didn't enjoy it as much as the pizza the other day, but that's probably because the company was a lot better in Dodger."

"You're such a charmer."

"I speak the truth. By the way, I told Chloe to add a vegan option for you at Christmas."

"Oh, thanks, that's very kind. I don't want to give her extra work with the cooking though. I can just bring something on the day if that's okay."

Grace snorted in amusement. “Chloe is not cooking, Liv, the caterers will be. Gosh! I don’t think anyone in my family knows how to make food from scratch. The only reason they ever set foot into a kitchen is because wine is kept there.”

“You called me Liv,” Olivia murmured.

“Oh. Yeah, it just came out. You don’t like it?”

“I do, actually. A lot. It’s just that everyone tends to call me Oli. Liv sounds a lot more... mature, and sophisticated, I guess. Is that how you see me?”

“As an alluring woman. Yes, for sure. Liv Bianchi,” Grace stated with a knowing chuckle. “You might want to amend your name to that on the flashy new website you swore to me you didn’t want.”

“That’s actually an excellent idea.”

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“Of course. What’s that weird noise in the background?”

Olivia laughed. “Everett pupped real hard today. Now he’s out for the count and snoring.”

“Okay. Look, I’ve got to go.”

“Are you still working? It’s close to eleven, Grace.”

“And early afternoon in Tokyo. I’ve got an online meeting with an architect there. And you know what they say: no rest for the wicked.”

“I like that about you, the wicked bit.”

“Good. Sleep tight. Text me in the morning.”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

“Likewise.”

Olivia put her phone down with a smile. Likewise. How so very like Grace to answer so laconically. And how attractive the sultry smile she managed to lace in that single word. Christmas and being reunited with her really could not come soon enough.

chapter 25

Olivia liked Reece from the first moment she laid eyes on him at Charlie’s house, and

he gave her a friendly handshake.

“Ms. Bianchi. Nice to meet you. Merry Christmas.”

“And to you as well. It’s a pleasure. Call me Olivia.”

“Sure, Olivia. I know who you are,” he added pleasantly. “I like your work. Cool website too.”

“Thanks.” She grinned. “Did Grace ask you to mention the website?”

He looked amused. “No. Why?”

“She was appalled by my old one. Told me it was crap and offered to help redesign it. Needless to say, I was a bit offended at that unsolicited negative comment.”

“I can understand that.”

“Yes. I told her I didn’t care for her opinion, and that I was perfectly fine with my ‘crap’ home-made site. So, she got one of her people to create a brand-new version of it and send it to me for approval. Made me swallow my own words in shame. And gratitude.”

“Sounds like Grace,” he chuckled, then turned to his aunt. “Hey, Charlie. Want me to walk the dog before we leave?”

“You’re a darling. Yes, please, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem. We’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“That boy has been night and day since he talked to Grace,” Charlie commented after

he went out. And she sounded slightly bemused.

“How come?” Olivia prompted.

“Well. First of all, these horrid accusations against him were dropped, so that’s a big weight off his shoulders.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant news.”

“Yes. Grace hired a wizard of a lawyer who got everyone to sit down and talk.” Charlie winked. “Fancy that, eh? Talking it out like reasonable human beings!”

“Awesome.”

“Reece had the opportunity to apologize, which is very fair to him. The women involved deserved to hear it from his own mouth, as well. Grace also got him to talk to someone about his drinking, and she invited him to Miami. It’ll be great for him to get away for a while and meet new people. The boy needs to find himself!”

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Olivia smiled at the way she kept referring to him as ‘the boy’, since Reece was a full-grown man well into his thirties. But she understood.

“I’m glad everything is being resolved,” she approved.

“Even better, I am delighted to see him and Grace finally on good terms again. These two always used to be so tight! I think it broke her heart when Reece chose to align himself with Jeremy.” Charlie eyed her with a touch of caution. Hopefully. “Olivia. Did she explain to you...”

She let her voice trail off, prompting Olivia to nod.

“Yes. I know what happened to her and her girlfriend that Christmas Eve. And the way her parents reacted to finding out she was in love with a woman.”

“She told you.”

“Yes, she did.”

Charlie’s eyes shone in relief and pure joy. She clasped her hand in hers and flashed a beaming smile. “I thought she might... I was so hoping she would! It occurred to me that she must have when she said she’d invited you for Christmas, but...”

“Don’t cry, Charlie,” Olivia said gently.

“It’s happiness, darling. You and my Grace... Yes?”

“Yes. We’ve grown close. Intimate.”

“I am so grateful.” Charlie hugged her. “So grateful!”

“Where is she, then?” Olivia inquired as she looked around the room. “Running late?”

“No, she’s here. Come.” In the kitchen, Charlie pointed out the window. “She’s outside making business calls.”

No coat, Olivia noted. Standing in snow up to her ankles in lace-up boots, tailored black jeans, and a fitted burgundy blazer. From her body language and energy, it wasn’t hard to guess that her lover must be laying down the law for whoever was on the line.

“Business calls on Christmas morning?”

“Go figure,” Charlie shook her head. “And gallons of black coffee.”

Olivia smiled fondly. Typical, she thought again. Her heart performed a nice little flip as she observed her. Grace had got in late the previous night. Or early morning, actually. They had not seen each other since Florida.

“I think she must be a little nervous about today,” Charlie said softly. “Does a great job of pretending, but she can’t hide it from me.”

“How long has it been since she saw her father?”

“Going on ten years now.”

“Gosh…”

“She’s doing this for me, you know? Though it turned out to be only due to stress and easily improved in the future, I was still shaken by my recent heart issue. Grace’s father, my brother John, also recently came out the other side of a tough round of cancer treatment.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was sick.”

“He’s doing much better now, thank you, darling. But I told Grace neither of us is getting any younger. And how I missed spending Christmas together as a family. She went away in that quiet way she has and didn’t mention it again. I had no idea she was working on a reunion behind the scenes. This is the best present I could ask for, and even better because you are a part of it.”

“Thanks, Charlie. It means a lot to me as well.”

“I’m so glad.”

“It seems reconciliation is in the air for the family now,” Olivia added.

“True. I think Chloe is as relieved as I am, to be honest. I’m sure you will like her when you meet her. Her husband, Mark, is lovely as well.”

“What about Jeremy?”

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“Ah... He’s a chip off the old block. He is extremely ambitious and determined to rule over his siblings. Too competitive for his own good.”

“And a homophobe, I take it?”

“Unfortunately, that is true as well.”

“Do you think he’ll be confrontational with Grace today?”

“I’m sure he’ll be sorely tempted. But he will tone it down, seeing as his father gave the green light for us all to be together. The rest of us will make up for his poor attitude if he shows one, won’t we?”

“Hundred percent, yes.”

Both women turned when the back door flew open to allow a brutal blast of icy air in and a woman who sounded revved-up in the extreme.

“I cannot believe the nerve of this—” Grace stopped mid-sentence as her eyes fell on her. Emotion flared and flickered all across her face. “Olivia.”

Charlie discreetly left the room.

“Hello there, Ms. Michaels.” Olivia nodded with a soft grin. “Who have you been raking over the coals on this fine Christmas morning?”

“A British architect who failed to understand that I enforce my deadlines.”

“Poor guy.”

“Nope. He deserved a good roasting over the fire. Lucky for him it’s Christmas, so I let him keep his job. Anyway...” Grace smiled as she pocketed her phone, stepped up to her, and took her face in both her hands. “Hello back.”

Her kiss was warm and infinitely gentle, drawing Olivia in and making her sigh. She sank against her, leaned in with both hands pressed flat over her chest, loving the feel and presence of her. She kissed her in return, slow and easy. Grace murmured in approval, then laced her arms around her waist and rested her forehead lightly against hers.

“Merry Christmas, Ms. Bianchi.”

“I wish you the best one ever, Grace.” Olivia held her back when she started to pull away. “How are you feeling? Tell me.”

Her lover shrugged, as expected, but she remained. “Ready. It’s going to be okay.”

“I think it’ll be lovely.”

“Yeah. Just remember not to take it personally.”

“Take what personally?” Olivia prompted.

“Anything any of the bunch might throw at you.” Grace’s upper lip curled with a hint of hidden temper. “I don’t think my father will start anything, or he’d have told me straight to stay away. But you never know with Jeremy. No matter what...” She cupped her chin and brushed her lips gently over hers. “I’ll be there with you.”

“Yes. And I’m not worried. I can handle my own.”

“I know.” On that, Grace straightened up. Back to brisk and businesslike, she pushed a little black box into her hand. “This is for you.”

“For me?”

Olivia stared at her in genuine surprise and she noticed her eyes soften. Grace looked like she was trying not to smile, and about to fail.

“It is Christmas after all,” she added.

Olivia melted. “You got me a present!”

“I did indeed.”

“Can I open it now?”

“Sure, you can.”

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As she opened the box, Olivia bit her bottom lip in awe and wonder. Oh, Jesus!

“Grace.”

“Art is life, and you create with wood.” Grace nodded, her crystal-blue eyes sparkling beautifully. “So I thought a little Tree of Life might be a meaningful symbol for you.”

“It’s solid gold!”

“Yes, it is.”

And heavy in her hand too... On a solid gold chain. Olivia stared at the necklace as Grace eyed her quizzically. “Well. Do you like it?”

“I love it. It’s beautiful... And so intricately carved! Grace, I think it’s exquisite.”

“I had it made for you in Chicago.”

“It’s bespoke?”

“Hmm-mm. May I?”

Olivia nodded as Grace took the necklace from her with a smile and stood at her side to pass it around her neck. Part of her wanted to say it was too much... It was too expensive, and she did not deserve it. This sort of weight in gold must have cost Grace a small fortune! Olivia also suspected that a small fortune to her, even though she made a good living from her work, must be a drop in the ocean for her lover.

Grace probably would not like to hear Olivia call herself unworthy of such a gift. And bickering about money would take away from the richness and connection of the moment. Not to mention being unattractive. She touched the necklace and glanced down to look at it.

“I love it,” she repeated. “And the symbol, too. It’s perfect.”

“Gold brings out the sparkle in your dark eyes,” Grace told her. “And it looks good on your skin.” She traced a light knuckle along the line of her jaw and flashed her a wink and a teasing smirk. “I chose well, didn’t I?”

Olivia burst out laughing and threw both arms around her neck.

“Incredibly well. Thank you! My present to you is going to feel quite insignificant compared to yours.”

“I don’t think anything that comes from you ever could,” Grace murmured.

Olivia watched her tear through the wrapping paper with obvious enthusiasm, and pull out a pair of sturdy winter gloves. There was also a red ski cap with a white pom-pom shaped like a snowflake attached to it.

“Hmm,” Grace said with a raised eyebrow at the swinging flake.

“I am fully aware it’s not your style,” Olivia chuckled. “But I see you constantly walking around without a hat or gloves, and that’s asking for trouble in this weather. Also, you’ll look cute with the hat on.”

“You think so?”

When Grace pulled it on over her blond hair, Olivia had to revise her opinion. The

headgear took nothing away from her aura of authority and power. But a light tease about that was better than admitting the mushy truth of it. Olivia wanted to keep her safe and warm and look after her in all the little ways that mattered.

“Well,” she considered. “Maybe not cute as such, but it does add a touch of quirk to your kickass vibe.”

Grace gave her the kind of smile that cut right through her heart. And with a quick glance at the door to make sure they were still alone, she dropped her purposeful attitude.

“I never think of stuff like that, you know?”

“Well, you live in Miami, so...”

“No, no. I mean sensible accessories to make my life easier.”

“You learned to tough it out.”

“Maybe.” Her gaze turned pensive and then she shrugged. “Yeah, probably. Your gift is sweet and thoughtful. I understand and appreciate the intention behind it. Thank you, darling.”

“Grace?”

“Yes?”

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“Will you please kiss me like you mean it?”

Now Grace flashed a roguish grin, swung the pomp-pom to the back of the ski cap, and proceeded as requested to lay a deep, slow, hot kiss over her mouth. Olivia was pretty sure her cheeks must be blazing red when they walked into the lounge, though Charlie focused on her niece.

“Oh, look!” she exclaimed in delight. “How sweet, my little Christmas elf!”

Grace grunted. Reece, back from walking the dog, laughed. And Charlie pulled them all into a group hug.

“I am so happy,” she declared. “So happy!”

“Good,” Grace approved. “Now let’s go slay that Christmas lunch. I’m starving.”

chapter 26

Olivia quickly got the measure of everyone. Mark was a friendly guy, a smart lawyer type, head over heels in love with his wife. Chloe looked like a dimmer, toned-down version of her sister. She may rely a bit too much on bling to shine, though Olivia was sure the diamonds on her ears, gold rings, and bangles that she wore were all real. With her sharp suit and immaculate make-up, Chloe struck her as a wannabe glitzy CEO, perhaps the type who had to work at it to compensate for a weaker personality. Not like Grace, whose air of command shimmered around her like power flowed in her veins instead of the regular red stuff. Still, Chloe seemed like she would be okay if one bothered to scratch under the surface a little. She greeted Olivia with a

smile.

“Ms. Bianchi. Nice to meet you. I hear you’re teaching our Charlie to cook more plant-based recipes?”

“That’s right.”

Olivia was both pleased and relieved when the woman did not immediately start to scream that plants feel pain too, or ask why she wasn’t dead yet from lack of adequate protein.

“I’ve been thinking of going vegan for a little while now,” she offered instead. “It just feels so complicated! Perhaps you wouldn’t mind giving me a few tips as well.”

“I would love to. I know it can be a bit overwhelming when you’re starting out, but it doesn’t have to be complicated. I’ll be happy to help you.”

Chloe blinked as if she’d not expected such an instant offer of help; and perhaps even friendship.

“Great. Thanks!” She smiled again as tension visibly left her shoulders.

Chloe threw a quick glance at her sister, who was talking to Mark and Charlie in front of the Christmas tree, then back at her with a telling look in her eyes that made Olivia think she must be imagining them together. She did not comment. All in all, it was pretty funny. Jeremy arrived as they were all sharing drinks and lively conversation. Dressed in a tux, with another elegant woman on his arm, though not the same as on the night of the awards, he eyed the room with practiced, ruthless efficiency. Olivia noticed a hush as he walked up to Grace, and everyone discreetly turned to see what would happen. She stood close, eager to remind her lover that she was not alone. Grace clasped her hand with a gentle squeeze of acknowledgment.

“Merry Christmas, Jeremy.”

“Yeah, bah humbug,” he replied and slid his eyes toward her. “You’re the artist.”

Olivia was surprised he’d heard of her, though he slathered the word with enough disdain to let her know he must not be a fan. Or care. She smiled in return, remembering Grace’s advice not to take anything personally.

“I am indeed. How do you do, Mr. Michaels.” She’d draw the line at telling him it was a pleasure to see him again.

When it became obvious he would not introduce her, Grace extended a hand to the dark-haired woman with him.

“Hi.” She offered a smile. “I’m Grace.”

“Kylee.” The woman smiled briefly and shyly, then looked to Jeremy clearly for direction.

So, he must be the controlling type with his partners, Olivia figured. Not that much of a surprise from the things Grace had told her. She was not sorry when he simply left his date there and went to speak to his brother. Charlie, Olivia noticed, was not shy about grabbing him for a bear hug.

“Okay?” she murmured when Chloe stepped in to engage Kylee in conversation.

“Yes.” Grace kept her eyes fixed on the twins. “I don’t want to leave Reece on his own with Jeremy for too long if I can help it.”

“Charlie is with him now, look.”

Her friend had one arm laced around his waist while Reece rested his comfortably around her shoulders. Charlie was giving no sign of wanting to budge.

“That’s good,” Grace nodded. She turned to her, blue eyes warming as they settled onto hers. “I’m really glad you’re here. Thank you for coming.”

“I’m glad to be here. I want to kiss you, Grace.”

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“Then do it,” her lover grinned. “Jeremy’s watching.”

Olivia chuckled and went right ahead. She kept it brief and reasonable, not wanting to overly provoke and offend anybody, but it was great to be a bit daring like this, and Grace clearly appreciated it. The patriarch of the family made his appearance shortly after. He was tall and lean. Olivia noted that his eyebrows had not grown back yet from his recent chemo treatment, but other than that, he did not look like it had taken too much of a toll on him. Charlie hugged her brother for a long time, and they stood together for a few more minutes, talking privately. Then, John Michaels headed their way.

“Do you want me to—”

“No. You can stay,” Grace murmured.

Olivia nodded, and she just took a couple of steps aside to give them space. Michaels did not glance at her or anyone else as he walked up to his eldest child.

“Grace.” Unsmiling, he looked her straight in the eye. “It’s been a while.”

It had to be said that he had an excellent poker face. Olivia had no idea what may be going on inside his head from his tone of voice, either. He did not sound angry or sad; he was just authoritative in that quiet way Grace also had to be. If he was happy to see her, he sure did not give it away.

“Father.” She nodded in reply. “Long enough, I thought.”

As Michaels put one hand on her shoulder, across the room, Olivia noticed Charlie smile.

“Yes. Long enough. Sorry I couldn’t meet with you in New York when you asked. Perhaps you will give me a few minutes of your time after lunch?”

“It would be nice, yes.”

Both turned to her at the same time. From the subtle shine in Grace’s eyes, Olivia guessed this first chat must have gone as well or even better than she expected.

“And you must be Olivia,” Michaels said with a charming smile which also surprised her. She could see where Grace got her charisma. “Charlie told me a lot about you. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She shook the hand that he offered and wished him a happy Christmas. At which point he glanced back at his daughter with a cocked eyebrow.

“Yes, I think we will manage that.”

Lunch went well, with everyone making a concerted effort to keep it that way. It also started with a bombshell that made Charlie well up in joy and even had John Michaels looking somewhat genuinely happy. The second they were all sitting around the table, Chloe sprung up again with a beaming smile on her face and announced that she had something to say.

“Mark and I... We are pregnant!” she declared.

In the boisterous congratulations that ensued, Olivia clearly heard Jeremy spit, ‘Hope

it's a boy',but no one paid attention to him. She also noticed Grace raising her eyebrows at Reece and shooting him a look. He shook his head and mouthed, 'Later'. Toward the end of the meal, when Olivia did not recall this little moment between them, he clinked his dessert spoon against the side of his glass. As all eyes turned to him, and Reece pushed to his feet, Grace took her hand under the table.

"What is it, son?" Michaels inquired. "You pregnant too?"

Though this was said in good humor, it still elicited a mean snigger from Jeremy. But it seemed a perfect launching point for Reece, who ignored his brother and just flew with it.

"Not pregnant, no." He flashed a smile around the table. "I just want you all to know something important about me that I kept suppressed for many years. It's not healthy to continue to deny it. And also, I like the man I am. So... I'm gay."

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Grace stared threateningly enough at Jeremy across the table to stop him from launching into a furious tirade but he still threw his napkin over his plate and left the table with a resounding 'Fuck that!'. Undeterred, and beaming with love, Charlie was the first one to stand up and raise her glass of champagne.

"To Reece!" she declared. "I love you so much, darling. And you are a fine man indeed!"

Everyone joined in the toast but their father, though Grace assumed his mild shake of the head and resigned grunt, 'Huh', was about as good as they could expect. Better than what he'd dished out to her on the day he found out she was a lesbian, for sure. She met him after lunch, as he'd offered, in his plush office that smelled of old leather and polished mahogany wood.

“It’s good news about Chloe,” he started.

“Yes, very good.”

He poured whisky into two tumblers and passed one to her, then sat heavily into his chair.

“How are you doing?” she asked, noting he looked tired.

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“Fine,” he grumbled with a shrug. “My doctors tell me I’m doing well. Just seventy-seven years old.”

“Ah... Yes.”

“So. Reece, uh?”

Grace gave a shrug of her own and just matched his style of conversation. “Yeah. Reece.”

He smiled faintly as she sipped her drink. “How long have you known?”

“Not long. I forced him to talk to me about the rest, and he opened up about being gay too. I don’t know if he told you, but I’ve offered him a job in Miami.”

“No, he didn’t. Working for you?”

“Yes. I think he needs to clear his mind, find his own way.”

“Without Jeremy to hound him, you mean?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“Right. I agree with you.”

“Really?” She could not hide her amazement, and a touch of healthy suspicion as well.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “I think you’ll find age and perspective go hand in hand.” When she just pressed her lips together and said nothing, he sighed. “At least for me, it seems. Reece will be welcome back here anytime he wants.”

“You should tell him that yourself.”

“I will. Does it make you bitter?”

“What?”

“That I will accept him as he is, when I rejected you?”

She shrugged. “It makes me grateful that you learned.”

“I approve of what you are doing for the resort as well. You always had more business sense than all the rest of your siblings put together.”

He asked about her own company and complimented her on the Excelsior deal. She found she didn’t have much to say to him in return, an obvious consequence of their lack of contact over the years. It was a bit sad, but she could not find it in her to feel sorry. He did not apologize, or tell her that he wished he’d done things differently. Not that she expected or needed that. But he thanked her again for having the intelligence and wisdom to get in touch, as he put it.

“It meant a lot to Charlie,” she said.

“Yes. I know.”

He turned to the window, and she supposed that was the end of it. Charlie’s warmth, in contrast, was like a blast of pure sunshine.

“Thank you, darling. Thank you so, so much!” She enfolded her in a tight, smiling embrace.

“Sorry Jeremy stormed out, but...”

“Nothing you could do about that,” her aunt assured. “And it wouldn’t be a real family lunch without a little show of temper from a childish kid.”

Grace laughed and snorted at that. “Yes. That’s one way to describe him.”

“I talked to Reece and told him I am fully behind him.”

“He’ll treasure that. Thanks, Charlie.”

“Of course! Now, I’m going to sit and chat with my brother for a while. If you want to take Olivia home, I’ll catch a ride back with Chloe later.”

“Okay, great. I will, then. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby. Merry Christmas!”

Perhaps because her own emotions ran a little high, Grace did not immediately notice anything wrong with her lover. But then, it struck her, as Olivia showed her through her workshop for the first time, that she seemed to lack her usual spark.

“Everything okay?” she prompted.

“Sure.” But her eyes had gone strangely flat, and she looked away quickly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Really. Let me show you the—”

“Olivia.” Grace stood in front of her and took her face gently in her hands. Now it occurred to her that she looked shaken. “Did something happen?” she repeated in concern. Then pretty much guessed it. “Did Jeremy have a go at you?”

“While you were in your father’s office,” Olivia admitted. “I know not to take it to heart, but he cornered me and—”

“What?” Grace roared, fury rising. “If he hurt you, I’ll—”

“No, no. It’s okay. He didn’t hurt me physically, but he said hurtful things about you.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“It’s not your fault. And he was just pushing buttons.”

Grace noted her reluctance. So she pushed harder. “Tell me what he said, Olivia.”

chapter 27

Olivia cursed herself for not being able to hide her feelings any better. But it was true that Jeremy’s vicious rant and his obvious hatred for his sister had shocked and upset her. She tried...

“Look, I’d rather forget about it.”

But Grace, of course, would not let it go.

“Just say it,” she demanded. “And don’t try to protect me. I want every word of what that stupid idiot said to you.”

Olivia took a deep breath. She released it sharply.

“Fine.” She suspected this was going to hurt. “He asked me if I knew the truth about you.”

“What truth?”

“That you’d run away from your girlfriend on the day you were attacked instead of helping her. He said you abandoned her. And left her to die. Grace!” Olivia quickly reached for her when she saw all the color leach out of her face. Her lover looked like she might fall. “Have a seat.”

“I’m alright,” came the answer, but her voice was hollow.

“Okay. Sit down anyway.”

“Goddammit. Goddammit, Olivia!”

“Yes, I know.” Olivia led her to the couch and sat down next to her. “It’s okay. I didn’t believe a word he said.”

“I did not leave her!”

“I know that, Grace.”

“Fuck! How dare he say these horrors to you? It’s not okay. I did NOT leave her to die. I was hurt. Almost passed out a few times from my own injuries as I carried her. I tried—” Her voice broke.

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“Hey.” Olivia pulled her close and wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders. “Grace. Look at me.”

She did, her blue eyes dark and full of fury. “I did not lie to you, Olivia.”

“I never thought you had. Not for a second. You don’t have to tell me the story again. Just breathe, you’ve gone pale.”

“I’m fine.” Grace shot up again and started to pace. Olivia watched her, resigned to the fact that she obviously needed to deal with her anger in her own way. And it was not sitting down to be consoled. “If you’d told me at the house that he said this to you, I would have punched him in the face.”

“That’s why I didn’t. Didn’t want to ruin things for Charlie, for you, and everyone else.”

Grace fixed her with still-heated eyes. “You’re kind. But it’s not too late for me to drive to his place.”

“Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

“Hmm.” She growled through gritted teeth. “And wise, too.” Grace forced a smile, though it did not touch her eyes. “I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with Jeremy that he can never stand to see any of us happy and getting along.”

“He’s an angry guy. Sounds bitter too.”

“Yeah. He’s got some dark in him, for sure.”

“Leave it alone, Grace,” Olivia advised as she watched her run a hard hand through her hair, and pace some more. “I didn’t react outwardly when he told me, so he didn’t get this fun there. He wanted us to be rattled. Don’t make his day by calling him to rant or going over there to punch him.”

Grace did look around the room as if she wanted to smash something.

“I guess he’s even more pissed because of the resort. There, he thought I was out of that picture for good, but somehow, I’m back. With the family on my side and our father’s approval, in charge of things once again. And he’s not.”

“How emasculating for him,” Olivia remarked with a light chuckle and was rewarded when Grace flashed a genuine smile this time.

“You bet.” Finally, she came to sit down. “I’m so sorry you had to deal with him on your own. I did not lie to you, Olivia. I would never do that.”

“Yes. I trust you on this.” Olivia kissed her gently. “Now don’t think about it anymore. Would you like to watch a movie? Lie down with me and relax?”

“I’m too wound up for that.”

“Well, Everett could do with a walk...”

“Great. I can put my new snowflake hat to the test.”

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Grace did her best to let it go. This was only Jeremy, she thought. Forever

manipulating and twisting things to amuse himself. He could turn nasty when he felt threatened. No doubt her return, albeit temporary, as she had no intention to make a takeover bid for the resort, had him feeling nervous. And Reece's news, too... His own twin brother? Gay? Yeah, that must stick sideways in his throat. Olivia was right. She should definitely take the high road on this one, and let it go. And Grace really thought she had, until she fell asleep that night, and her mental barriers all went down. All of a sudden, she found herself back on that awful day. She knew she was dreaming at first. Then she became lost in the emotions of the memories. From the innocent joy of meeting her girlfriend on a pure, snowy Christmas Eve, to annoyance when the group of young men showed up. She felt the pain as they started to beat her up, and red-hot rage when she realized she did not stand a chance against so many. Such a cowardly bunch they were. Soon, her anger turned to fear. Not for her own self, as Jeremy tried to convince Olivia; but at the notion that she would not be able to defend her partner. And what would they do to Miriam when she was down for the count? Jeremy's accusation had pushed the right button, indeed. Hit the raw part of herself that felt guilty for the death of her girlfriend, and manifested in the dream. Miriam had trusted her the same way Olivia said she did. And yet, Grace had failed her. She was not strong enough. Not fast enough.

"Grace!" Miriam screamed. "I did not want to die!"

Blood in the snow and all over Grace's hands and face.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her heart breaking. "I am so sorry!"

And now it was Olivia's blood. And Olivia's liquid brown eyes stared back at her. No anger. No screaming accusations. Olivia just looked so sad.

"Don't go," Grace cried to her. "Don't leave me!"

"I'm sorry... I have to."

“Olivia. No. Please!”

Stretches of dream time, her arms aching from the weight of her. Olivia... Miriam. Merged into one now. Dead. Gone. Though she knew this, Grace would not stop walking. In snow up to her knees, it felt like mud sucking at her heels. Dragging her down and costing her precious time as she carried her dying girlfriend to safety. Don't go, Miri. I've got you now. You're going to be okay.

“Grace?”

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Come on, babe, we're almost there!

"Grace."

No. Don't leave me. Desperation now, because deep down, Grace already knew. Miriam. Olivia!

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"Grace!" Olivia yelled at her for the third time. "Wake up now!"

They had gone for a soothing walk, or so she really hoped it had been. Two and a bit easy miles which proved too much for little Everett. So, Grace tucked him safely inside the front of her jacket, where he promptly dozed off.

"I'm kinda jealous now," Olivia joked and got her lover to laugh again.

"Catch you up when we get home," Grace promised.

Olivia kept one arm locked tightly around hers while they walked the snowy streets. They talked about Miami. About her own work. And Grace's new design ideas for the Excelsior chain. Anything but touchy, painful topics. Back at the house, she lit a fire in the bedroom and pulled on a nightshirt.

"What are you doing?" Grace protested.

"Oh, yeah." Olivia chuckled and she got rid of the shirt. "Good point."

They caught up, as promised, and fell asleep in each other's arms. Just after three A.M., a single scream wrenched Olivia out of a deep slumber. She jerked upright, her heart pounding, and dove for the light. Her puppy, in his basket in the corner of the room, whimpered softly when she looked at him. Olivia blinked hard, relieved to find no intruder in the room. Even so, not all was well. Grace sat staring at the wall with a far-away look in her eyes and tears running down her face. When Olivia reached out to touch her arm, she found her to be as hard and rigid as a piece of steel.

"You're having a nightmare. Hey Grace?" She knelt in front of her and managed to turn her slightly toward her. "Look at me."

Grace stared right through her at something only she could see. Trembling. "Don't go."

"I'm here," Olivia assured her.

"Don't." The look in her eyes was pure misery.

"I am right here in front of you." Insisting, Olivia took her face in both hands. "Look at me. Wake up, Grace, that's enough now!"

She was cold, her breath coming out in ragged bursts. For sure it was a frightening moment, not being able to bring her back from this. At a loss, Olivia just wrapped her arms around her and held her close. She gripped tighter when Grace tried to push her back, even as she repeated those two words. Don't go.

"It's okay. Just a dream. Wake up, Grace, you're okay."

Olivia kept whispering gently to her until she felt a slight change in her body. She was not so tense now, and the shaking was not as bad.

“Olivia?” Grace asked in a raw, broken voice.

“Yes.” Olivia squeezed her gently. “Right here.” Okay, she was back, eyes focused fully on hers now through a remaining sheen of tears. Olivia ran her fingers through her tousled hair and kissed her softly on the lips. “Bad one, huh?”

Grace swallowed twice, hard. “Yeah.”

“You can tell me if you think it would help. You don’t have to, but...”

A fresh wave of pain made the tears sparkle. “I dreamt of the attack again.”

Of course...Courtesy of your stupid brother, Olivia reflected in frustration. She kept silent about that, aware that a rush of anger from her was the last thing Grace probably needed at this point.

“I’ll get you some water,” she offered instead but turned back sharply at her next sentence.

“I failed, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t protect you.”

“Me?”

“Her,” Grace corrected with a wince. She rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache, which would not be surprising. “I mean, Miriam. It was her in the dream, as always. But toward the end, she had your face. You were bleeding in the snow. And you looked at me so sad—”

Ah. God! As Grace’s breath hitched, Olivia grabbed hold of her again tightly. “I’m so sorry, Grace.”

Grace leaned into the embrace for only a couple of seconds before pulling back with a defiant statement.

“I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“Well...” Olivia strongly suspected that she was not. Not completely, this was blatantly obvious. And for this stuff to rise to the surface in such a violent way after a single trigger, it had to still be extremely close under the skin to begin with. “Take your time, okay?”

Grace nodded, though it was more like a gutsy jerk of the chin. Hurt and sadness gave way to a cool, flat expression in her eyes. Regaining control by sheer strength of will. It was like watching iron shutters rolling down on her emotions.

“Sorry I scared you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Would you like a glass of water?”

“No. Thanks. I need coffee.”

“It’s 03:20. Middle of the night.”

“I have my laptop in my bag. I can do some work.”

Her face was as white as the snow outside. And if you knew how to look, which Olivia was beginning to learn very well, you would see that her eyes still held a heavy touch of haunting from the dream. But she was already getting up, and Olivia assumed it would do no good to argue.

“Anybody ever told you you’re as stubborn as a mule?” she just said.

“Sure. No, stay,” Grace added in a softer tone, as she was going to follow her out of bed. “Go back to sleep, Liv.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’ll make you some coffee at least and sit with you if you insist on getting up now.”

Grace opened her mouth, closed it again, and gave a quick shake of the head.

“Alright. Mind if I take a shower?”

“Of course not.”

Olivia watched her walk into the bathroom and close the door quietly behind her. Something wrong, she thought, and not just the dream. Feeling sad and dejected, but determined not to let it show, she gave Everett a quick cuddle, then headed to the kitchen to put coffee on the go. Whether Grace wanted her to or not, she was going to take care of her in the best way that she could. Some of this also meant making pancakes, so Olivia got to work.

chapter 28

Grace stood in the shower with both hands flat against the tile wall and her head bent under the jet of water. She made it cold, intent on shocking herself out of the dream. She also needed to get rid of this urge she felt to drag Olivia back into bed, snuggle deep into her arms, and cry her heart out. Olivia would not think any less of her if she gave in to that weakness. Grace knew it, just as sure as she knew she was going to break her heart. Oh yeah, she had warned her in the beginning. No promises. But then she'd gone full steam ahead and invited her to Florida, and Christmas lunch at the family home. The nightmare was telling, and not just brought on by Jeremy's thoughtless, hurtful remarks. Grace knew that too. She threw on clothes quickly, then took a second to steel herself before she went out. To lock down her emotions, be sure no more tears would escape her will.

"Hey." Olivia greeted her with a cup of coffee and a valiant smile, but it was written all over her face. She knew something was up.

Grace accepted the coffee, put it straight down, and pulled her into her arms. "Olivia—"

"Wait," her lover said softly. Pulling back just a little to look her in the eye, she flashed a surprisingly brilliant smile. "And be patient with me now because I am going to quote the Buddha. Okay?"

Grace was taken aback enough at this declaration to simply nod. "Okay..."

"Here goes the saying: 'Never reply when you are angry. Never make a promise when you are happy. Never make a decision when you are sad.'"

"Your Buddha is a bossy one."

“And wise,” Olivia countered.

“For sure. But I’m not angry. And I didn’t make a promise.” Grace kept her own tone gentle, and careful, but she did owe it to her to be honest.

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“I remember very well what you said.” Olivia leaned into her for a tantalizing brush of the lips. “But you are so incredibly sad that it makes me want to cry as well. So, please don’t make a decision right now, Grace. That’s all I’m asking. I can sense how hard this is for you... Probably has been since the beginning. So take your time. No rush. No pressure.”

No number of walls would keep these words from hitting home. I know this is hard for you. Olivia’s easy understanding and acceptance penetrated her armor like a hot knife slicing through butter.

“Right.” Grace swallowed around a ball of rising emotion, yet again, as hot tears burned the back of her throat. “I’ll take some time.”

“Alright. Great.” Olivia briefly laid the palm of her hand over her cheek before averting her gaze and turning away from her. Giving her time to regain her composure, Grace understood; which only made it harder to do. “I understand you must not be hungry at all right now, but pancakes are good for you in these circumstances.”

Under more normal ones, Grace might have inquired if this was another Buddha quote, but she was too busy holding herself together to even think about joking. She so wanted to stay here... To drink coffee, maybe. Eat if she had to. To bask in Olivia’s warmth and her gentle hugs, definitely. At the same time, she wanted out of there like her body required oxygen. By the time she headed off to the airport to catch her flight, and thank God she’d booked one on the same day, she was ready to explode. Just outside Red Falls, she had to pull over on the side of the road. Getting hard to breathe again, and her heart was pounding like after a half-mile sprint. She

knew the signs of an impending loss of control. Understood the reasons for this struggle.

“Fuck!” All alone, she screamed at the snow-covered trees in frustration, anger, and plenty of sadness.

Olivia could read her like a book, apparently. Although her compassion made it very tempting to be with her, it also invited long-suppressed emotions that Grace feared more than anything.

“Get in the car and go,” she muttered, ordering herself.

Tears burned but she swallowed them back. And drove the rest of the way with the window open, welcoming the lashing of freezing cold air on her face. Boarding the plane with a splitting headache, she just gritted her teeth and opened her laptop. She had plenty to keep her busy. She would focus on work, her tried-and-tested way to deal with unwanted emotions. Let all settle. No problem.

???

Olivia sought refuge in her workshop. Over the following week, she delivered early on a project that she had initially promised for the new year, delighting her customer and earning herself a repeat order from the woman’s sister. She cleaned her house, top to bottom, and took Everett on lots of forest walks. At the gym, she lifted weights until her arms threatened to fall off. Declined the offer of the new personal trainer there to go out for a drink with her, though she was a friendly and attractive woman. But yeah; Olivia sure was not interested in flirting. No vegan events took place at this time of year, which was good since she was in no mood to go a round with someone intent on proving that cutting a carrot was the same, and just as cruel, as slicing the throat of a living chicken. Zero patience for this kind of bullshit at the moment. The hardest thing for Olivia was to grant her lover the solitary time she had advised her to

take for herself. And try not to dwell on the idea that Grace may have shut down on her for good.

“Oh, now you want me to insist?” she snorted when Dana told her she should call.

They were on their way out of town in her friend’s truck after the vet's office received a call about an injured dog spotted in the area.

“Well. Have you spoken to her since she flew back?”

“We’ve messaged a couple of times. Grace is fine.”

“Uh-huh. How about you?”

“Me too. Don’t worry, okay? What road did that guy say to head out on?”

“Road 6 out of Red Falls. We’re looking for a black lab.”

Olivia kept her eyes peeled in the vanishing light. It was to be another cold night, and an injured pet would not stand much of a chance in this weather if they could not find him.

“I’ll park here and we’ll go on foot,” Dana announced. “You head south and I’ll take the other way. Got your radio?”

“Yeah.”

“Watch out for icy patches.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Haha.”

Ten minutes later, as it began to snow again, Olivia spotted the animal and she radioed her search partner. “I’ve got him, D. Black lab, limping a bit. His right front leg is swollen around the middle.”

“Older dog,” Dana observed after catching up. “You can see he’s going a bit grey around the eyes. Dammit, Olivia!”

“What?” Olivia frowned at her angry tone.

“I’ll bet that’s another Christmas victim. People are tossing out their pets in favor of a new puppy. Look at him!” she added with feeling, as the wounded dog eyed them warily from the tree line. “Hurt, and freezing cold out there, but too frightened to come to us for safety.”

“How old do you think he is?”

“Seven or eight, I’d say.”

“Not that old, then.”

“Nope... Just not in fashion anymore,” Dana stated bitterly, before shifting to a reassuring tone. “Hey, boy! How are you doing? Are you hungry? Come here. Come on!”

The dog whimpered as she called to him, limping forward and back again with his tail between his legs.

“It’s okay, we’re going to take good care of you. Come here, boy.” More whimpering, almost like crying, as the animal clearly fought his impulse to come forward. In an agony of indecision. “Someone hurt this one too, you know?”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. He’s got that look about him.”

“He seems so lost and exhausted,” Olivia murmured.

“Yeah, and you can see he’s torn between his desire to trust us and the fear of it.”

“Hmm.”

Olivia bit her lip as she recalled seeing an eerily similar expression in the eyes of the woman she loved—and more than once. She had noticed the raging conflict. She recognized an almost painful desire to trust and let go, but also fear and reluctance at the same time. Grace was caught in the middle, lost in her contradictions.

“You okay?” Dana elbowed her in the ribs.

“Yeah, yeah. But this is sad.”

“We’ll make it better. You grab the blanket, Oli, and I’ve got treats. Let’s bring him in.”

It took ten minutes of back-and-forth to win the dog over without adding more trauma. Finally, Olivia bundled him into the blanket, and they carried him back to the truck with his tail tentatively wagging.

“The leg’s not broken, just sprained.” Dana wrapped a tight bandage around the limb, laughing when the dog licked her face in gratitude. “You’re welcome, my friend. Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“Stop crying, babe.”

“Oh...”

“We’ll go via the practice to give him a warm bath, but then I’m taking this one home. No shelter for him tonight.”

Olivia wiped her eyes, surprised to find tears on her cheeks, indeed. Was she crying for this dog, who looked at Dana with such innocent love in his big brown eyes despite what hurt may have been inflicted by another heartless human being? Or for a woman who was just as starved of warmth and affection, whose wounded past made her resist falling in love a second time?

“Can I hold him on the front seat?” she asked.

“Yes. And leave him in the blanket so he stays warm.”

Across the seats, the animal kept his good leg extended and his paw on Dana’s thigh as she drove, as if he could not bear not to be in contact with her for a second. And he never took his eyes off her face.

“Good boy.” She smiled and patted him on the head. “Look at you wagging your tail again! You are so cute.”

“What will Mel say to you bringing home another rescue, D.?”

“Oh, she’ll be fine. Did I tell you we are moving soon?”

“No!” Olivia stared in surprise. “Where are you going?”

“Only a couple streets over from where we are now.” Dana laughed at her puzzled expression. “Just to a bigger house. This way, Mel will have an entire room for her ever-growing library and a separate office for her writing.”

“Alright. Good idea.”

“Yeah. She buys the books and I bring home the doggies. It works for us. Hey, wanna come for dinner to celebrate another successful rescue?”

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Thinking of her empty house, Olivia nodded. “I’ll just go pick up Everett first, okay?”

“For sure,” Dana approved. “The more dogs, the merrier, as I always say.”

It was nice to relax with her friends, though watching Dana and her wife of almost ten years interact together made Olivia think of Grace, and how much she missed her. With Grace, she had experienced the deep connection that she observed between the two women. Their love was reflected in every gesture, it shone in every smile. Olivia had felt the same vibe with Grace, and she did not believe it was one-sided. Upon going to bed thatnight, she took her phone with her and started to call. But then, hesitated. If she started a conversation, she had to be prepared for the fact that it might not go the way she wanted. Olivia might not have risked it tonight if the choice had not been taken out of her hands. Right on cue, Grace’s number flashed on the screen. Of course, she answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Liv. It’s me.”

“Hi...” Olivia melted. The sound of that warm, husky voice and the nickname that only her lover used elicited a flurry of tingles down her spine. “How are you, Grace?”

“Okay. You?”

“Yes, I just had dinner with friends. Rescued a lost dog this afternoon.”

“Ah. Good.”

“Work is good as well. Grace... I miss you so much!”

Oh, shit! She had not meant to say it... Or at least, not blurt it out with so much emotion. A silence followed, during which Olivia mentally screamed at the wall.

“Grace?” she prompted. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Are you at home?”

“No. In my office.”

“After ten o’clock? Working really late again.”

“Yeah.” She sounded impatient. Cool and reluctant. But no less determined, apparently. “Look, there’s something I have to say to you. Olivia, I’m really sorry...”

Olivia steeled herself for what she feared would be coming next.

chapter 29

Though it was not good news, it did not immediately hit home for Olivia, and she actually maintained a surprising, staggering amount of optimism. Some may have called it denial. Whatever. Grace let her down so gently that it was easy to fool herself. Her lover was so careful with her, in fact, that Olivia woke up after a short and mostly sleepless night, convinced there was still hope for the relationship. Again, she would give her time and space. Grace would come to her senses. She would change her mind. Simply had to, right? A full week passed. Then, another. Grace did

not call again. When Olivia bumped into her sister in town and learned from Chloe that she had flown in and out for a crucial meeting with the resort team, the bubble finally burst as all her hopes were crushed. She was right here? Grace had come to Burlington to see her people, but she had not told her. Had she intentionally not driven the short distance over to Red Falls? Maybe she had, Olivia figured, to visit her aunt. But not me. Not me... It was like a giant hand squeezing her heart. As reality sank in, inescapable, it hurt enough to make her want to sob. Olivia did manage to keep a straight face in front of Chloe, but she decided that a workout and a trip to the supermarket were more than she could handle. She drove home.

“I didn’t think she meant it. I thought she’d just... God, this can’t be happening again!” She vented to her puppy as he licked her face in sympathy. “I don’t want to lose her.” Now, a spark of anger flared. “Especially because she’s so damn wrong!”

Looking up, Olivia was startled to spot the last person on the planet she wanted to speak to at the moment, getting out of her car in front of the house. She considered running out the back door to avoid her, but it would be stupid. Knowing Charlie as well as she did, the older woman would just chase her into the yard and all around the block if she had to. Ridiculous. So, Olivia swallowed her tears. She put any further breaking of her heart into a million pieces on hold for the time being and went to let her friend in.

“Hello, darling.” Charlie hugged her tight, kissed her on the cheek, then beamed a smile and penetrating glance at her. X-ray eyes that missed very little. “I thought you might be up for a cup of tea.”

“Um, you know, not really. I was just—”

“I brought you some,” Charlie informed as if she had not spoken. She took off her coat and hat and threw them on the back of the couch. “Pukka. Soothing chamomile. Yes?”

Olivia sighed, figuring resistance would be futile as she was already heading to the kitchen. “Fine.”

“I just spoke to Grace,” Charlie announced.

“Yeah?” Though she would have loved to be able to shrug it off, tell Charlie it was all the same to her, and actually feel that she did not care, Olivia’s wounded heart rallied well enough to produce a jolt. “Hmm... How is she?”

“In a hell of a mood.”

“Well, what else is new?”

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Charlie chuckled. “Did you know she was in town?”

“No.” Olivia admitted the truth to her, miserably. “I had no idea until I bumped into Chloe, and she mentioned it.”

“When was that?”

“Just now. I just got home.”

“Ah.” Charlie nodded as if a bunch of things suddenly fell into place for her. “You know, she didn’t come to see me either. Said she was in a rush, lots of work, blah, blah, blah. Of course, I see right through her bullshit. She didn’t come because I would have made things difficult for her. Olivia, darling. Tell me what happened.”

“We broke up.” Her chest heaved painfully as she said the words. Dammit, it hurt so much. “We—” No, this wouldn’t be accurate, would it? “Grace broke up with me.”

“Proof that a whip-smart woman can be a magnificent fool as well, sometimes!” Charlie declared with a massive eye roll.

“I agree.”

“Don’t cry.” Charlie hugged her again, sounding very much like Grace when she was issuing commands. “Just let me make you a cup of tea, and we’ll talk. Okay?”

“If you want. But I hate tea. And I don’t know what talking about it is going to achieve.”

“Coffee, then.”

“Charlie—”

“Ssh. Hush now, my girl, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It will be,” Charlie assured her softly, affectionately “Trust me; I know Grace.”

“So do I.” As they sat, Olivia blew air out in frustration and a good dose of heartbreak. “I know her very well. She’s so damn stubborn!”

“Did you tell her that?”

“Of course. Obstinate, like a stubborn mule.”

“Good for you.” Charlie smiled as she sipped her tea. “Bet she enjoyed that.”

“I think she did, actually. Go figure.”

“Sure. And it’s clear as day.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Her girlfriend, Miriam. You know, that young woman was very smart as well, and definitely no pushover. On the contrary, I think she was very good for Grace, the way she tempered her fiery streak somehow. Miriam never hesitated to stand up to her and tell her when she was pushing it too far.”

“I didn’t realize you knew Miriam.”

“Grace is like my child, so I made it my business to know, darling.”

“Did you know she was gay?”

“I always suspected. Anyway, I am telling you this because I do believe that Grace has been waiting her whole life to find a woman like Miriam. One she clicked with on a deeper level, and who would not be afraid to call her out on her bullshit.”

“Ah.” Olivia just shrugged. Sighed again, deep and hard.

“I believe this woman is you, darling. She told me she never knows what to expect with you.”

“Like this is a good thing?”

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“Well.” Charlie flashed a complicit wink this time. “She did make it sound like it was a great annoyance and irritation to her, but that’s just for show. Do you know, in all these years, she has never invited anyone home? Or even spoken fondly to me about another woman?”

“Sadly, we’re done now,” Olivia muttered in rising sadness. “And I’m sorry, Charlie, but this feels weird, talking about Grace when she’s not here.”

“I’m talking to you, darling.”

“But it’s over, okay? God. I don’t want to cry again.” Olivia stood up to pace. “I just need to get over it. And I will. I knew what I was in for. To her credit, she never made any promises, never said we would have more... Now we’re done. Finished.”

“Don’t accept it, Olivia.”

Olivia chuckled at that. Bitterly. “You know, not accepting things, holding on to relationships, has got me in huge trouble in the past. Charlie, I won’t be doing that again. Learned my lesson, thank you very much.”

“Are you in love with her?” Charlie inquired softly.

“No,” Olivia snapped as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Olivia—”

“No,” she repeated, knowing it was a lie. “I’m just... No.” Not in love, don’t want to

be in love. No way!

“You are.” Charlie nodded. “Oh, baby!”

“Don’t say that to me. Don’t baby me. Why do you look so happy, anyway?” Olivia struggled not to sound impatient. “Do I really need to say it again, Charlie? Grace told me we can’t go on. She doesn’t want to be in a relationship with me. Or anyone. Ever. I don’t know why I got it into my head that there was still some hope, but—”

“Because you understand her on a deeper level, of course,” Charlie interrupted with another convincing nod. “You can hear the things she’s not saying.”

“I’m getting a headache.” Olivia raked her fingers through her hair in more irritation. She sat down again, exhaled, and shook her head. “She was kind. Gentle, but very clear. And it has been more than two weeks without any contact. She’s moved on.”

“Don’t let her.”

“What?”

“Don’t accept it. It takes two to break up, right? She can’t do it without you.”

“Charlie, you’re talking crazy.”

“Make her commit, Olivia. It’s time.”

“But she doesn’t want to! And she’s already in the wind!”

“No, she’s not. Go get her. Remind her of how you feel. Have you even told her? Uh?”

“There’s no point.”

“So you’re just going to take it lying down?” Charlie rubbed a gentle hand over her shoulders. “That’s not like you, kid. Look, Olivia. Grace is scared. You see that, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to beg.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“But it would be. You know, Dana is right. I need to learn to accept that sometimes things won’t go the way I want them to. And that I am strong enough to face the truth on my own.”

“Done.”

“Huh?”

“Well, yes. You’ve learned it. Demonstrating that to me right now. Lesson learned. You’re in control.”

Well, she did have a point. Olivia relaxed a fraction as this dawned on her, then revved up again.

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“I know Grace went through a lot. I do understand her, yes. I know part of her is still hurting and grieving. And though it hurts me too, to know this and not be allowed to help her, it’s not my job to heal her.” Glancing at Everett, it struck her. “She’s not a puppy who needs rescuing!”

“Well. Okay.” Charlie nodded, stood up, and dispensed a quick hug. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Olivia let her walk halfway to the door before she threw her arms in the air. “I mean, what am I supposed to do?”

“Tell her the truth of how you feel, at least. It doesn’t have to be tearful, and you sure don’t need to beg. But you should tell her straight, so she knows exactly how it is.” Charlie smiled softly, warmly. “Olivia; don’t make it so comfortable and easy for her to walk away from you, darling. It should be hard. Really hard.”

Olivia sat on her own after Charlie went home, feeling low-key angry and resentful. And stunned. She had worked hard to rebuild herself and her self-esteem. To learn to be okay on her own again. And now, this? Charlie’s advice was the complete opposite of what Dana had told her. A little voice whispered at the back of her mind...Now it's up to you. Only you. What are you going to do?

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It was great to see what some regular talk sessions with a good therapist and a demanding job to keep him challenged could do for a willing man. Grace reflected on all this with satisfaction as she returned to her office after a quick lunch with her

brother. Reece had already acquired a nice tan. He was letting his hair grow a bit, which suited him. He was running early mornings before work and losing some of the weight he'd put on after months of booze and inactivity. His work ethic was impeccable of course, as she thought it would be, and he was fast making friends around the office. It was not even a bit strange for Grace to have him on the team. Reece was doing well. Life was good. Or so she told herself, repeatedly, several times a day.

“Ms. Michaels?” She turned from her panoramic window to face her assistant. “The representatives from No.5 are on their way up.”

“Show them in when they arrive. Then hold my calls and all other business.”

“Absolutely.” Libby allowed herself a grin and two thumbs-up. “Good luck!”

Grace did not require any luck; she was fully prepared, as always. Still, she did appreciate the sentiment and favored her assistant with a quick smile of her own.

“Thank you.”

Managing to wrangle this meeting with the elusive board of No.5, a string of, indeed, five luxury boutique hotels in the heart of Paris, was an achievement in itself. Grace liked France and she would love to do business there. Convincing the owners of No.5 to let her handle their design requirements would open a door for Brazen Inc. onto the rest of the European market. The UK. Spain. Italy! Grace had prepared ferociously for the upcoming presentation. There was also the added bonus that it helped to keep her mind off of her personal life, and Olivia. Though Grace told herself that she had made the right choice in letting her go, it still hurt. And every day, it seemed, a little more. The woman was hard to forget. Still. It was better than feeling out of control. At least, hurting was nothing new.

chapter 30

Patrice Leconte and his business partner, Stephanie Charpentier, clearly enjoyed her presentation. It would be hard not to, really. Not only did Grace deliver it on blueprints of their own flagship hotel in Versailles, but via holographic technology they weren't likely to see anywhere else any time soon. Last but not least, she did it all in flawless French.

“Mademoiselle Michaels, vous êtes une vraie merveille!”

Leconte regarded her with delighted blue eyes from behind a pair of thick purple and black glasses that she could not decide were for show, or because he really needed them. With his wild blond hair and impeccable white suit, he reminded her of Elton John. Next to him, his fashionably thin partner was all decked out in Chanel from head to toe. A nod to their brand, no doubt, and vice versa.

“You are the only designer we've consulted so far who was able, and happy, to speak to us in French,” she approved in her own attractively accented English.

“We had one head of marketing try his best, didn't we?” Leconte chuckled. “In London. We had to beg him to switch to English so we could understand. He was quite offended, but... C'est la vie, hey!”

“Well, it's a pleasure for me,” Grace assured them both. “I lived in Paris for a year when I was a dancer.”

“A dancer? Ou-la-la!” Charpentier laughed. “Were you a professional?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of dancing?”

“Bachata. Latin style. Sensual dance.”

“I like the sensuality very much,” the woman declared. “In everything. Oui, oui, j’aime beaucoup.”

Oui, oui, Grace thought. Gotcha.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

She had sent Libby out shopping with instructions to bring back a sultry, seductive, and full-bodied vintage red. French, of course, and with a proper cork instead of a plastic screw. And because she adapted to her customers whenever she had to, for maximum results, she asked Leconte if he wouldn’t mind doing her a favor and opening the bottle for them.

“Oh, mais bien sur!” he agreed with a flourish and amused her further by producing an old-fashioned twisted metal corkscrew out of his pocket.

How so very French. Leconte then reclined on the sofa with his glass of wine and crossed his legs elegantly to reveal a flash of purple socks under his trousers. There was a definite theme there, which Grace’s in-depth research had uncovered. She had made sure to include a few dashes of his favorite color in strategic places in her presentation.

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“I am very happy,” he declared. “And you, ma chère?”

“Yes,” Charpentier confirmed. “I just have a few questions. If you wouldn’t mind, Mademoiselle Michaels.”

“Of course, go ahead,” Grace invited.

Clearly, Charpentier knew her stuff when it came to design.

Over the next twenty minutes or so, she grilled Grace pretty hard on all aspects of the proposal. Grace enjoyed the exercise and answered intelligent questions on technical details. Charpentier looked thoroughly satisfied by the end of it.

“Maybe you can prepare a draft contract for us to look at,” she said. “Oui?”

Smelling sweet victory in the air, Grace was about to tell her she’d be delighted to do it when raised voices on the outside caught her attention. Before she could do more than frown, the door to her office flew wide open. Olivia strode in, followed by a red-faced and desperately apologetic Libby.

“Ms. Michaels! I am so sorry! She—She just came up and went right past me!”

“Grace. We need to talk,” Olivia announced.

Well. Fighting a natural urge to swear out loud, Grace just raised a calming hand.

“It’s okay, Libby. I’ll handle this.” Then dismissed her with a subtle wave.

“Oh, dear. So sorry.” Libby bowed on exit.

Grace focused on Olivia for all of a micro-second, but it was enough to ascertain a few things. She must have dressed for the occasion again, to crash one of the most important meetings of the year. Or was it perhaps to embody her butch spirit, and give herself more courage? Whichever, she did look impossibly good in threadbare jeans, black motorcycle boots, and a white flannel shirt open to reveal a black tank top underneath. Not the sort of look Grace appreciated all that much on a woman before. Too butch, indeed. On this particular woman, though, it all struck her as the height of sexy and taste. Even so, as Olivia opened her mouth to speak, she shut her down quickly with another sharp hand gesture.

“Is Charlie okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. I just—”

“Has someone died or been injured?”

“No. No, it’s not that at all. Grace, listen—”

“Now is not a good time, Olivia. I need you to go and wait for me outside.” In the background, Grace could see her two clients exchanging puzzled looks. She had been leaning against the front of her desk when Olivia made her theatrical entrance, and they were both across the room on the sofa. As Olivia was facing her, it occurred to Grace that she must have no idea they were not alone. Which could turn things tricky, very quickly. “Look, I’m in the middle of an important—”

She never got to finish. As she took her arm, with the firm intention of turning her around to reveal their audience, Olivia stuck her ground. Then she landed a surprisingly commanding hand on the back of her neck, covered her mouth with hers, and proceeded to kiss her as if the world was about to end. Humph. Grace stiffened at

first, then her mind went blank. She forgot... Just forgot. Every damn thing. This was pure bliss. These hot lips pressed against hers? Absolute joy. Why fight it? Though Grace did not consciously ask herself that question, her unconscious mind certainly did not supply any good reasons. She may have grunted as she righted herself, grabbed hold of her lover, and kissed her back. It was brief, but hard. Intense as they come. Olivia pulled back, breathless. Her dark eyes were huge.

“I came to tell you that I love you, Grace. I don’t want us to break up.”

Grace could only stare, speechless. Then, a giggle sounded from the other side of the office, and she looked past Olivia to find both Leconte and Charpentier on their feet. Damn if they did not start clapping...

“Magnifique!” Charpentier declared with a hand over her own heart. “So romantic! Mademoiselle Michaels, you are in a love story? Oui? J’adore!”

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Olivia could not get out of there fast enough after realizing her faux pas. To be fair, the assistant had not been at her desk to stop her when she arrived. Then, when she caught up with her... Had Libby really told her that Grace was in a super-important meeting, and should not be disturbed? She must have done it; Olivia just could not remember a word. She’d had only a single thought in mind at the time, and it was to see her lover. When she walked into the office, she only had eyes for her. So, there. Grace looked so alluring in her black suit, and that white shirt with the high collar. Blond hair slicked back, her blue eyes sparkling...Stunning.But of course, the stunned look on her face, the sharp eyebrow she raised in disapproval, and, now that Olivia reflected on it, a clear warning not to proceed should have been a clue. But she had so wanted to kiss her... To tell her how she felt! So, she did.Sue me.Ha! That was the spirit, though she also cringed at the realization that she may have cost Grace a crucial deal.

“Here.” The forgiving assistant handed her a glass of water. “It is Ms. Bianchi, right?”

“Olivia. Please.”

“Okay. I’m Libby.”

“I’ll tell Grace it was my fault. You won’t get into trouble for this.”

“It’s alright.” Libby smiled and she patted her gently on the shoulder. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

They both glanced up as the door to the office opened and the two visitors, the guy with the weird glasses and the woman who looked like a fashion model, exited and made their way to the elevator. Grace remained standing in place with both hands planted firmly on her hips, glaring menacingly. Looking a bit paler than she had before, and quite a bit pissed, too. Like it might not be fine at all, actually.

“Um...” Olivia started.

“In here,” Grace snapped.

As she spun on her elegant heels and stalked back into her office, Olivia’s own temper began to simmer. Surely she did not deserve this kind of attitude? She made sure the door was closed properly before voicing her displeasure out loud.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? But it’s no reason to make me feel like a kid being called into the principal’s office.”

“How you decide to feel is none of my doing.”

“Okay. Right.” Good point. Then again... “You’re in a mood. I get it.”

“In a mood?” Now Grace added a snarl to her furious glare. “In a mood? Olivia, do you have any sliver of an idea how much I despise drama?”

“You hate not being in control. Yes. I know.”

“Drama!” Grace’s eyes fired dangerously. “You think you can waltz in here without my permission, interrupt me every time I open my mouth to speak, then go right ahead and kiss me like... Like you did? Makes me look like I’m not in charge of my own office in front of important clients. And—”

“You kissed me back,” Olivia pointed out.

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No.”

“You most certainly—”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Grace hissed.

Before Olivia could react, she fisted both hands in her shirt and pushed her roughly against the wall. Pinned her good and proper, to Olivia’s delight and confusion. The kiss that ensued was even fiercer than the previous one. Demanding. Ravenous. Gorgeous! Oh, how Olivia had missed this way Grace always had to kiss her as if she truly ached for her! All she could do was let herself melt under that seeking mouth. She would not have it any other way, really. Her lips parted with a sigh, allowing her full access. And her knees turned to water.

“Now.” Grace pulled back suddenly, with her eyes flashing and color riding high across her cheeks. “Now consider yourself kissed.”

“Uh... Yeah.” Olivia sighed, chuckled, and could not help a smile she knew must look totally destroyed and overly mushy to a woman who did not like ‘Drama’.

“Grace, I really am sorry. I didn’t realize you were in a meeting. In the middle of a crucial deal. Libby explained, but...”

“Too late, obviously.”

“Well, I didn’t give her much of a chance.”

“I did try to tell you but you kept interrupting.”

“I know. I’m sorry for not letting you speak. Is it off, then? Did I kill it?”

“The deal?” Grace finally smiled and looked faintly amused with it. “No, I believe we are totally on. They loved your little scene.”

“Really?”

“French.” Grace snorted. “You know what they’re like, uh.” Olivia had no clue, but she let it pass. “They thought it was just great. Utterly romantic. Made me cringe, but...”

Olivia could not let her get away with this one. She did not hesitate even briefly before confronting her. After all, two could play this silly game of tit-for-tat, and she had nothing to lose at this point.

“You know I can see right through your act; don’t you?”

Again, an arrogant eyebrow lifted in challenge. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. I think my little scene, as you call it so coldly, and probably only to protect yourself against the effect of such drama...” Ironically, Olivia used her fingers for air quotation marks. “I think this is the most romantic thing that’s happened to you in a very long time.”

“How very presumptuous of you.”

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“Uh-huh. I think you loved it. And that’s why you kissed me back so fiercely in front of your clients.” Olivia held her own under her icy stare. She knew Grace did not mean it. That it was, indeed, only for protection. She allowed her own gaze to soften. “Anyway. We could dance around the topic all day, but I would rather not. Grace, I meant what I said to you before. I am in love with you.”

She watched the declaration hit for a second time. Grace no longer appeared so stupefied, but she still looked frozen. Numb. Or...Maybe not. Because at the same time, Olivia spotted a rush of emotions racing behind her eyes. In shock, she concluded. Yes, it was more like it.

chapter 31

Grace worried that if the back of her neck tightened any harder, her spine might crack. She reached for the glass of wine she had barely touched, managed to cross to the sofa, and sat down. Her whole body had gone as tight as a bowstring. Even the muscles in her face, she could feel, were painfully rigid.

“Can’t do this,” she murmured, at first, just to herself. Then she raised her eyes to the woman who acutely tested every drop of control and detachment she had painstakingly cultivated over the years. “I told you, it’s not going to happen. I’m not trying to be cruel, Liv.” Again, she failed not to use the intimate nickname Olivia enjoyed. With her frustration mounting, and helplessness seeping in, Grace exhaled long and hard. “You know that, don’t you? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Yes, I understand.” Olivia slid gently next to her. “I don’t either, Grace. On the other hand, I will try to make this really hard for you.”

What the...? Suspicious and weary, Grace held her gaze with a hard stare. How did Olivia always manage to do this? She never failed to surprise and baffle her. Makes me feel like I'm on the edge of falling. Grace intensely disliked being so unstable. At the same time, she feared it was also a huge part of the attraction.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"It's a theory: you cannot break up with me if I don't want you to. Because it takes two to tango."

"Are you high? Drunk? Or something?"

"No." Olivia chuckled. "This is Charlie's opinion."

"Ah. Yeah, figures." Grace took a deep calming breath. She did not often resent her aunt's wisdom... But she did now. "This is none of her business. And she damn well should stay out of it."

"She was just giving me advice."

"You need advice? Huh."

"I know you don't mean to sound so cold and dismissive. Grace." Olivia laid a firm hand on her shoulder to hold her back as she was about to bolt upright again. "The only reason I didn't tell you how I felt the other day on the phone is because when my last relationship ended, I totally broke down. I begged my ex not to leave me."

Grace could not suppress a wince of displeasure that she knew must look like a snarl. Didn't mean it; could not help it. The curled lip earned her an understanding glance in return.

“I know, I know. It was pathetic. I literally begged her not to go.”

“You didn’t beg me.”

“Nope.”

“Not going to do it now, are you?” Though she hated to sound so aloof and cutting, Grace found it impossible to adjust her tone. Inside, she was boiling. Not with anger, but tension. Once again, her failure to get a good grip on her feelings and the situation was both startling and deeply unpleasant.

“I’m not here to humiliate myself,” Olivia said.

“Good.”

“But I went too far the other way with you.” She gave her a long and thoughtful look. “I was too passive in just accepting everything you told me, and not speaking my truth. Charlie does have a point, you know? This is not just about you and what you want to do.”

Grace sprang to her feet at the sound of three different notification bells hitting at the same time: email, Telegram, and a text message coming through. Work. Her world, entirely predictable, orderly, and safe, required her attention. She also could not bear to be so close to Olivia and observe such lingering sadness in her eyes. She knew she was responsible for putting it there.

“So, then.” She turned around, ignoring her thudding heart and the sick feeling in her stomach. “What is it that you are here to tell me?”

Olivia rose as well, abandoning all pretense.

“The truth,” she nodded. “I owe it to me and you both to be honest. At least one of us has to, huh?”

Grace narrowed her eyes but she did not reply. Olivia had every right to be angry, and she could not rise to take the bait. She could be cruel and vicious when cornered; Grace knew this about herself. Lashing out now was not an option.

“I don’t want to fight,” she said.

“Neither do I. I love you, Grace,” Olivia went on. “I want to be with you. I think you feel the same way but are too frightened to admit it. Even to yourself.”

“So you’re insulting me now?”

“It’s an observation, not an insult. You smirk in arrogance when I tell you I begged, but I don’t think you’re in a position to judge. You’re just as extreme, except with you it’s the opposite way. At least, I let myself feel. Going through life on emotional lockdown is just messed up.”

“Alright. Great. Thank you for your fabulous insight. Now if you’re finished with your little speech, and psycho-analyzing me...” Grace waved an irritated hand toward her desk as yet another notification sounded. “I’m busy.”

Olivia did not move or say anything else. She just fixed her with that sad, sad look in her eyes, testing her resolve. “Well?” Grace prompted.

Her lover was too accurate in her observations, and Grace was going to start shaking. Any second now, the tension in her body would become unbearable, and really impossible to hide. She wanted to be alone when this happened.

“I’ll be at the Holiday Inn,” Olivia said. “Until tonight. I’m on the first flight home tomorrow. By the way, it doesn’t go with your outfit.”

“What?”

“The bracelet I gave you.” Olivia gestured. “Doesn’t go. But you’re still wearing it.”

She walked out on that, leaving the door wide open behind her. Grace turned to face the window, the strain in her face now such that it actually hurt. She glanced at the

bracelet that she had not taken off since Olivia had given it to her. Well. She stared forward again as her eyes slowly filled.

“Ms. Michaels?” Libby now. “Is there anything you need?”

The contract. No. 5. Paris. Some goddamn space to breathe! Focus, dammit!

“Yes.” Grace did not look at her. She just rested one hand on the glass for balance and swallowed around the tight ball in her throat. “I need you to prepare—” Her voice caught, prompting her to swallow again.

“Ms. Michaels, are you okay?” Libby appeared in her field of vision, looking concerned.

“I need you to prepare the draft... contract.” Was her throat swollen? Why was it so damn hard to speak, all of a sudden? If love did this to you, she was better off without it.

“Let me get you some water.”

“I don’t need water.”

“Okay.” Libby hurried to shut the door, then poured her a glass anyway. “Ms. Michaels, I think you should sit down. Your face is as white as a sheet.”

“I need you to prepare the contract for No. 5.” Grace tried again, aware that she sounded like she’d swallowed a mouthful of sand. “We need to add a clause—No, I don’t need this...”

She spilled half the glass her assistant put into her hand before she managed to set it down. Now, the shakes took hold, and her vision turned a little dark at the edges. I

love you. I want to be with you. Blood in the snow.

“Ms. Michaels!” Libby gasped when she swayed.

“I’m okay,” Grace grunted.

“Do you need me to call a—”

“No!” she snapped. Reaching the couch, she sat on the edge and dropped her head between her legs. Spoke through gritted teeth as the office started to pitch and roll. “I need a minute.”

Libby said something else to her she did not catch. Hard to hear through the pounding of her heart, the rushing of blood in her ears. She closed her eyes when her vision narrowed a bit more. This would pass, Grace knew. Just like everything else, feelings and emotions. I think you feel the same way... Frightened... With her teeth clenched, she focused on emptying her mind and taking several deep, slow breaths. By the time the trembling stopped, and she looked up again, she was surprised to find that Libby was sitting next to her.

“You’re still here,” she muttered.

“Yes...” Her assistant flashed a cautious smile. “You know, I was tempted to call 911.”

“Oh, God!”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t.”

“Good. Told you there was no need.”

“I trusted you, even though it looked like you might be having a heart attack.”

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“Huh.” Grace shrugged. “No. Just a rush of...” She replaced the word ‘Panic’ with a vague gesture. Then, too tired to argue, took the fresh glass of water still on offer. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course.”

“So.” She breathed in deeply. “About the contract.”

Grace went through the details and then checked her incoming messages. These were all reports or questions from staff attached to different projects. She answered them easily. There was a long rambling email from her sister, complaining that Jeremy was annoying the hell out of her at the resort. She composed a sharp reply. ‘Annoying you? How specifically?’ Then stabbed the SEND key.

“And how is it my problem? How old are you all, really?”

Sitting back to consider, she realized that her response was probably unnecessarily harsh and sarcastic. Sighing, she wrote another one.

‘Chloe: if he gets in the way of anything we agreed on, remind him that it’s in the contract he signed. He can’t oppose any of it now. If it’s something else, and I can help to resolve the issue, let me know. I can kick his ass equally well on the phone or in person.’

Three seconds later, a reply landed.

‘LOL,’ it read, which made her eyebrow twitch. ‘Something in the contract, yes. I’ll

handle it myself. Thanks for the reminder. Just needed to get it out of my system. XO'

Kisses on official emails? LOL? Feeling both annoyed and perplexed, Grace pressed her intercom button. "Libby."

"Yes, Ms. Michaels. I'm not quite finished with the contract yet."

"That's fine. I just need you back in here a minute."

Libby walked in two seconds later, prompt as ever, armed with the iPad she always used to take notes.

"Ms. Michaels." She sounded nervous. "If this is about the interruption earlier, I am terribly sorry..."

Grace waved that off. "Have a seat, please. Glass of wine?"

"Uh... I..." Libby's eyebrows hit the ceiling in amazement, just before her expression shifted to utter devastation.

"What's the matter?" Grace frowned.

"You're going to fire me. Please, don't. I'm—"

"Christ! Relax, will you? Of course, I am not going to fire you!" Grace secured a glass of wine in her hand and fixed her with a stern gaze. "Though this answers one of my questions, at least. You think I'm a bitch; don't you?"

Libby's jaw now hit the floor to match her raised eyebrows in utter perplexity.

"No, no," she protested. "I... I would never..."

“I’m a big girl, Libby. I can take it. Tell me the truth. I want feedback.”

“Ms. Michaels, I do not believe you are a... A bitch,” Libby assured her.

“Hmm.” Grace tilted her head and jerked her chin in more challenge. “How about arrogant? You think I’m too cocky?”

Libby took a deep breath, a sip of her wine, and a moment to adjust her glasses. Steadier now, she nodded. “I think you are excellent at your job. At the very top of your game. And a bit of agenius all-round, actually.”

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. Yeah.Well.“I won’t argue with that.” Her dry ironic tone had her assistant smiling.Finally!“What else?”

“You do not suffer fools gladly,” Libby added.

“Anyone who does is a fool themselves. No?”

“Yes, I agree. You are also very demanding, of yourself and the people you work with. You never cut corners, always strive for excellence. Operating at such a high level, with low tolerance for mediocrity, will make some people think of you as arrogant, aloof, bossy, pretentious, cold, and domineering. In summary, a bitch, yes.”

Grace watched her in silence.You asked for feedback, right? So now take it.

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“It probably doesn’t help your case any that you are such a lone wolf,” Libby continued, clearly warming up to the exercise. “You don’t need anything or anyone, and you’re not afraid to let people know it. No one likes being made to feel... Superfluous, I suppose. Irrelevant. Unrequired.”

“Right. Is that how I make you feel?”

“No.” Libby sipped her wine and grinned again.

“How come?”

“Well. First of all, I am damn good at my job too.”

“You certainly are.” Grace nodded and allowed a faint smile of her own. “The best. That’s why I will not fire you.”

“Yes. And also, I see the real you.”

Why did this send another flash of panic coursing through her? Grace had no idea, but a headache began to circle again. She switched from wine to water and rolled an imperious finger to keep Libby going. Let’s hear it.

chapter 32

“I know you are also kind,” her assistant went on in a similar voice. “Caring, helpful, extremely generous. But this you keep behind the scenes, never seeking credit or recognition for all the good things you do. Ms. Bianchi...” Grace held her breath at

the mention of her lover. “I think she sees the real you as well.”

A bold statement from Libby. And risky, too, veering into the personal like that. Grace swallowed to digest it.

“Falling in love,” she reflected then. “Sometimes it does feel a bit like having a heart attack. Don’t you think?”

“It can be intense.” Libby chuckled.

“It’s scary.” Grace exhaled. “I guess even more so for a lone wolf, domineering, and emotionally locked-down bitch like me.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Libby was still smiling gently. “But I’m sure you know, Ms. Michaels, that true love only comes once or twice in a lifetime. Of all the deals you’ll ever make, it’s the one that really counts.”

“Hmm.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Did Ms. Bianchi really say you are an emotionally locked-down bitch?”

“She didn’t say that specific word but yes, that was the gist of it. And that she’s in love with me.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Hmm-mm.” Grace flashed a smile. “She kissed me in front of the French contingent.

The kind of kiss a French person would highly approve of.”

Libby’s eyes glistened again, but now she was beaming. “I will finish the draft contract and take care of sending it. I’ll clear the rest of your schedule for this afternoon as well. No problem at all. You should go.”

“What about the—”

“No.” Libby was polite but firm. “Go. Now.”

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The growl of the Ferrari’s engine had never sounded better. The wind streaming in her hair as she raced down the freeway, the glint of sunshine on water, colors flashing... Everything so much sharper and more vivid. Must be the feel of true freedom, Grace thought. And that ugly weight on her chest, which she used to feel from time to time, was fully gone now. She pulled in front of the Holiday Inn, climbed out of the car, and headed straight for the entrance. Spotting Olivia up ahead, about to cross the street, she raised her arm to catch her attention. Before she could do so, there was a yell.

“Jaycee!”

A woman on the other side, laden with shopping bags and pushing a buggy, ran after a toddler who had escaped her grasp. As he suddenly shot across the street, like a bullet fired from a gun, the woman’s shout turned into a blood-curdling scream.

“JAYCEE!”

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A large delivery truck was fast approaching. Stunned faces turned to stare at the buzz of its ship-like horn. There was the sound of screeching brakes. More screams from people as they realized the situation. That truck won't be able to stop. Grace was too far to intervene, but she saw that Olivia was already flying. She watched her cut across three lanes of heavy traffic. How she made it to the other side without taking a hit was a miracle in itself. And then she was able to grab the kid. Grace clearly saw her tuck him against her chest and turn her back to the road in an instinctively protective gesture. She was running too. And still too far. Goddammit! She heard the horn again, that dreadful blast, warning of impending disaster.

“Olivia!”

Horried, Grace watched her desperate attempt to leap out of harm's way. The truck, a nightmare of destructive power as it thundered past, obscured her view right at that moment. By the time she could see again, Grace noted that the kid was up, and running back toward his mom. Olivia was on the ground. Not moving. Not getting up. The sight of her so still was sickening, and a powerful trigger. Blood in the snow...No.NO! Grace almost shouted it out loud. Not again!

“Olivia!” She dropped to her knees in front of her. “Liv!”

Frantically, she laid her hands on her shoulders and started to turn her over so she could see her face. Watch her neck. Be careful with her back. Oh, God, what if she's—

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“Ow. Shit. Dammit! Fuck, fuck!”

Olivia hissed in agony as her right knee pulsed and burned with enough heat to melt the pavement. She clutched at her leg. Broken? She kept her eyes tightly shut against almost unbearable pain. Then a single word cut through it all. One word spoken in that low and husky voice she would recognize anywhere.

“Liv.”

Disoriented, Olivia blinked in the sunshine as she glanced up. A sea of faces in front of her. Where had all these people come from?

“Grace?” she called. “Grace?”

“Here. Look at me. I’m right here.”

She was. She had come. Relief flooded through her as Olivia focused her attention on these intent blue eyes. Her heart lifted. Could this mean—

“You’re bleeding,” Grace interrupted before she could ask her anything. “Talk to me, babe. Are you okay?”

“I... Yeah. I just... I smashed my knee.”

“Your elbow, too.”

Olivia barely glanced at the huge bruise already forming. Her shirt was all torn up on that side. No matter. Even through her own pain, she could still hear an edge of pure terror in her lover’s voice. She reached for her, took her wrist, and kept her eyes firmly locked onto hers.

“I’m okay. I promise. The truck didn’t hit me.”

“Are you sure?” Grace insisted. “Did you black out at any point?”

“No. Just twisted my knee on... upon landing.” Damn. That brutal ache made it hard to talk. “I pulled something when I fell. I think it’s dislocated.”

“Get back!” Grace roared at the crowd of onlookers. “Give us some space. Let her breathe, for God’s sake!”

“I called an ambulance,” someone offered. “They’re on their way.”

“I don’t know what’s taking so long,” Grace grunted as she moved to sit behind her. “Lean back against me, darling. Try to relax.”

“Is the child okay?” Olivia inquired through gritted teeth.

The kid’s mother reached them just as she asked. “Oh my God! Thank you, thank you! You saved his life. Are you hurt? Is there anything I can do?”

“Put your kid on a damn leash,” Grace snarled.

Olivia might have laughed and also reassured the woman if her knee had not felt like someone was slicing through it with a butcher’s knife. She could not suppress a moan with her next breath.

“Grace... It hurts.”

“I know, babe, I’m sorry.” Grace kissed the side of her face and obviously tried her best to keep her comfortable. “Look, the EMTs are here. Hold on just another minute, okay?”

She refused to move when they examined her and insisted on riding in the back of the ambulance with her. Olivia was even more grateful for her presence than for the gas and air they put her on, which instantly took away the pain and made her mushy beyond all shame—at least according to Grace at the time, who did not sound impressed. And yet... She did not leave her side for a second.

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“That’s my woman,” Olivia gushed at the EMTs. “Just look at her! Ain’t she great?”

The dislocation of her knee was so severe that they had to sedate her to put it back into place. She woke up sometime later, feeling sore and totally sober once more. Empty room... Her leg and elbow were wrapped up nice and tight. She was on her own. For a second, panic hit as she doubted her memory. Had Grace been there before? Had she really come for her?

“Hey. Olivia? Over here.”

Cool fingers settled on her cheek, prompting her to turn her head. Grace. At the sight of her standing on the other side of the bed, for real, for sure, Olivia burst into tears.

“Oh, man, I thought I’d dreamt it all!”

“What?”

“You! That you were there with me... Were you? You came with me in the ambulance, right?”

“Yes, I did.” Grace spoke softly, soothingly. “It’s okay, don’t cry.”

“Don’t go, okay? Don’t leave just yet.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Period.”

“You’re so pale. Grace...”

“Shh. Take it easy.”

“But—”

“And don’t worry about my face. It’s just because the coffee is so weak in this place that it should be against the law.” Grace made her opinion known with her usual aplomb and that sexy, familiar smirk. Which turned warm and tender as she sat on the bed and took her hand in hers. “Let’s focus on you. How are you feeling?”

“Ah... Kinda crap.”

“Well, yeah. I’m not surprised.”

“But fine too, if you see what I mean.”

“Somehow, it makes perfect sense. On a scale of one to ten, how’s the pain?”

Olivia moved her leg gingerly to test it and sighed in relief when she experienced almost none. “It’s down to around two. Maybe a three. Let’s say two and a half.”

“I find precision so attractive in a woman.” Grace flashed her an amused smile which Olivia decided was positively sultry. “Your doctor said anything three and below is normal. You also sprained your elbow, and you’ve got terrific bruising on your right hip. At least, nothing is broken. You’ll just be on crutches for the next two or three days. Rest will not be an option. Okay? Got it?”

“Yes.” Olivia kept her eyes fastened intently on hers. “You came.”

“I did.”

“I mean, before the accident. You came to see me?”

“Turns out your little speech was very effective. A bit of a kick in the teeth, but necessary.” Olivia started to protest that she never meant it to be like that, but her lover stopped her with a gentle kiss. “It’s alright. I needed to hear your side. And Libby confirmed.”

“Libby? What’s she got to do with it?”

“I asked her for some character feedback, shall we say. She was bluntly honest, as I requested. Told me she sees through my layer of bullshit, more or less. Like you do.”

“I see the real you,” Olivia murmured. “I love the real you. I know it’s a scary thought for you.”

“Not as terrifying as watching you almost get killed in front of me.” Grace pursed her lips with a tight shake of the head. “I thought it was happening all over again. You know?”

“I’m sorry.” Olivia squeezed her hand. “But I’m here. And I also have no intention of going anywhere.”

“Yes.” Emotions flickered wildly in those blue eyes before Grace regained control with a deep breath. “I told Libby that falling in love feels a bit like having a heart attack. Who’d want that, huh?”

“You, obviously.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Olivia caressed her cheek, smiling softly. “The real you certainly does, no matter how high you raise that dubious eyebrow at me. What else did your clever assistant tell you?”

“That we’re incredibly lucky if true love strikes twice in a lifetime.”

“I agree with her.”

“She said I’m a genius when it comes to my job, but that of all the glittering deals I could make, you are the one that really counts. She’s dead right about that.”

It was a good thing, Olivia decided, that she wasn’t hooked up to a heart rate monitor. Or Grace’s words would trigger all the alarms.

“Libby deserves a nice pay rise, I think,” she reflected.

“She does; consider it done. I feel like the luckiest woman in the world right now, Olivia.”

Olivia cupped her face in her hand. “Do you love me? For real?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Even though I’m a baby butch dyke?”

“And so not my type, it’s untrue?” Grace rolled her eyes in pretend disapproval, but she could not keep a straight face. “Yes.”

“Tell me more, Ms. Michaels,” Olivia demanded.

”I am startlingly, delightfully, helplessly in love with you, Liv. And I would not change it for all the riches in the world. You’re a big deal, you know?”

“Well, if you say so.” Olivia pulled her in for a long, deep, and steadying kiss. “I’ll believe you.”

“I had my wonderful assistant pick up the Ferrari I dumped at your hotel and bring it over here. What do you say we get out of this place?”

“You need a coffee, huh?”

“I don’t, actually,” Grace answered with a lingering smile. “Right now, all I need is you.”

“So, are you abducting me?”

“Too right I am.”

“Great!”

*** epilogue ***

Christmas Day. A year later.

Olivia stood next to Charlie in the kitchen. Both observed Grace on the other side, who stood coat-less in several inches of snow and seemed to be barking orders at some unfortunate person on the line.

“Does she always have to work on Christmas Day?” Charlie wondered, shaking her head. “And yell at people?”

“French employment laws are giving her a good run for her money,” Olivia stated, and she chuckled in amusement. “I think she’s having a lot of fun with it, actually.”

Grace strode in on a blast of arctic air and cocked her head at them both.

“Here we are again,” she announced. “I am getting major Déjà-vu vibes.”

Olivia figured it would always be difficult for her to be back in Red Falls. To spend time with the family... And at Christmas, even more so.

“Was that your lawyer on the phone?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How are things in Paris?”

“Well,” Grace smirked. “Typically French, I suppose.”

“As in chaotic?” Charlie chimed in with a laugh.

“Yes. They seem to revel in disorder and disobedience over there.” The smirk turned into a superior wink. “Nothing I can’t handle, obviously.”

“You’re so sexy,” Olivia chuckled.

“Merci beaucoup.”

“How do you say sexy in French?”

“Same, just with added tongue,” Charlie quipped, joining in the mood with a wicked repartee of her own.

Christmas lunch at the family home went surprisingly well considering that Reece showed up with his new boyfriend. After spending six months in Miami, he had returned to Burlington a changed man, and reclaimed his place on the board of the family business. The resort was thriving once again. Jeremy’s fury was pretty obvious from across the table, but he did not dare say a word. Reece’s lover, Toby, was a

carpenter on the new team that Grace had hired, and a former state football player. At six foot four, full of muscle, and twice the size of Jeremy, he made an imposing figure. Not the kind of guy Jeremy would attempt to bully, for sure.

“Outnumbered by the gays at the family table,” Grace said to him with an exaggerated smile. “Bet you never thought this would happen, uh? How does it feel, brother?”

“Shut up, Grace,” he grunted.

As for the family patriarch, he barely spoke to anyone past the first disapproving nod of hello, and only had eyes for Chloe and Mark’s new baby girl, named Autumn.

“Fresh hope for the future,” Grace reflected. “Since none of his own kids really turned out the way he wanted.”

“Do you care that he barely tolerates you and Reece being here?” Olivia inquired softly.

“I don’t give a damn. And you know I’m only here because of Charlie again.”

“Of course.”

“Chloe and Mark, too. They will be good parents.”

Olivia smiled at the happy couple. “Yes. I like them both very much. Chloe and I really hit it off. And with Reece, too.”

“I’m glad but not surprised.” Grace pulled her close. “You are a hard one not to like, Ms. Bianchi.”

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They flew to Paris the very next day. Grace was keen to be there before work on a new contract she had won on the back of the No. 5 deal started –Afterthe holidays, since the French insisted on taking the entire period between Christmas and New Year as vacation. Taking time off never used to be her thing in the past, but she had to admit that roaming the back streets of the French capital with Olivia, introducing her to weird and wonderful, off-the-wall arts places, and enjoying the odd glass of wine in some atmospheric bistro, had its moments.

“You’re loving it, aren’t you?” Olivia teased her. “Tell me the truth.”

“It’s not too bad,” Grace allowed.

On New Year’s Eve, they had dinner at a rare establishment in France: an exclusive vegan restaurant, the only one of its kind in the country to have won a coveted three Michelin stars.

“It’s great,” Olivia decided. “I love the atmosphere.”

“And not a single escargot in sight,” Grace approved.

Closer to midnight, they joined the crowds on the Champs Elysees for a night of dancing and revelry. Five A.M. found them queuing at a café with a bunch of locals to enjoy a French NewYear’s Day tradition: warming bowls of the famous onion soup, served with fresh baguette and a daring glass of red thrown in for free.

“I am, actually,” Grace stated.

“Uh?” Olivia glanced at her in wonder.

She looked a bit disheveled after their long night out. And perhaps even more attractive because of it, Grace thought, in the faux-leather WWII pilot jacket that she had bought her for Christmas. With a mile of multicolored woolen scarf wrapped around her neck against the cold, tousled hair, red cheeks, and watching her with those glittering brown eyes... Grace almost lost herself in her liquid gaze.

“Loving this vacation.” She nodded, picking right up from the previous conversation.

“Oh, right!” Olivia caught on quickly and with an easy laugh. “Me too. Loving life with you, Ms. Michaels.”

“So, I know you’re not into all this stuff... Social norms and doing things by the book. But just in case you wanted to square things away between us,” Grace added with a little one-shoulder shrug. “I would be happy to.”

It took a moment for her meaning to register, she saw. Then Olivia’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Are you asking me?” she prompted.

“Asking you?”

“Yeah. Is this your way of... popping the question?”

Again, Grace shrugged. “Well. I guess so.”

She watched her lover stare in fascinated silence for several long seconds. Then Olivia treated her to a challenging eyebrow raise, the kind that she no doubt had learned from her.

“You guess? Come on, Grace!”

“You’re not big on convention, I know that.”

“But you think I might want to get things...” Olivia twirled a finger in the air. “Squared away?”

“Yeah. It would make sense, don’t you think?”

“Hmm...”

When the corner of Olivia’s mouth twitched, Grace could not tell for sure if it was in amusement or irritation. “Hmm?” she encouraged.

“I guess it would make sense, yes.” Olivia pursed her lips in obvious distaste. “We could be like the squared-away business deals you like.”

Okay, so this was taking a decidedly funny turn.

“Forget it.” Grace tore a chunk off the baguette to drown in her soup. “We don’t have to. I just thought you might—”

Olivia chuckled. “I adore you, Grace.”

She punctuated that with a hard kiss that had some French connoisseurs in the café murmur in appreciation. There were a few rumbles of, ‘Oui, oui, a good way to start the year.’

“What are you doing?” Grace mumbled.

“Enjoying this moment,” Olivia answered with twinkling eyes. “But I am an artist, remember?”

“Yes, I know. So?”

“So, don’t give me this rational stuff. Don’t talk to me like I’m your lawyer or your business partner.”

“Right.” Grace favored her with a smirk. “Okay.”

“Don’t hide, and put it all on me.” Olivia caressed her cheek with the back of a folded knuckle. She kissed her again, slow and tender this time. “I want honest and real. Raw. I want YOU. Do it.”

Grace dropped her spoon with a sharp exhale. “You really are going to make me work for this, aren’t you?”

“Yep.” Olivia licked her own spoon. “Totally am.”

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That smug and cute, demanding look on her face had Grace smiling and her heart rate picking up. Well, it occurred to her that this may well be the happiest day of her entire existence, so she told her partner.

“I love doing life with you, Olivia. Waking up with you in my arms every morning... That sleepy look in your eyes, and the way you always grunt before you’ve had your first coffee. Yeah, like this.” Grace chuckled when she demonstrated. “I love your laughter, your sizzling sense of humor, and your thirst for adventure. Damn... I even like it that you’ve turned me almost completely vegan.”

“Work in progress,” Olivia winked.

“Yes. I love kissing you. Making love to you. All the ways you have of calling my bluff and making me feel... More. Like now. Only with you, I know it’s safe.”

“I love you, Grace,” Olivia whispered.

“I love you too, babe.” With a shiver of anticipation, Grace allowed her smile to bloom. “And you are absolutely right, this is for me. Well, I hope for you too, but...”

“Oh yes.” Her lover nodded, grinning now. “Me too.”

“I want you to be my wife. Officially. In life and on paper. In all the ways we can be linked, I want it. So, I got you this...” Grace pulled the little velvet box out of her pocket and opened it to show her the ring.

“Whoa!” Olivia said. “Y—”

“Wait, wait!” Grace ordered, laughing. “You’ve got to let me do it properly.” She got on one knee, looking up into the eyes of the woman she so loved. “Olivia Bianchi; will you be my wife?”

“Only if you will be mine too, Ms. Michaels.”

She made her heart melt. “Deal,” Grace promised.

Olivia threw herself in her arms with a joyful yell. People clapped, and someone said, ‘Ou-la-la!’ For sure, Grace reflected. It was a cracking way to start the year.

THE END...