



# Single Dad Christmas

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** Louisa Petrakis is on the run from a bad breakup and way too much publicity. She's hiding out in faraway Sydney, just hoping to pass the festive season without a hitch.

Her temporary boss has other ideas...

Noah Fox is as demanding as he is successful, and when it comes to Louisa, he expects the best. What he doesn't foresee is the complication of their romantic attraction, and how it overtakes his meticulously planned life. His whole focus is on being the best father he can be, but a little fun on the side can't hurt, as long as they remember it's definitely not for keeps.

**Total Pages (Source):** 58

## CHAPTER ONE

LOUISA HAD KNOWN MEN like him before. Well, not exactly like him. Noah Fox was the first Australian billionaire she'd met, but he was not the first man who was tall, dark, ruggedly handsome, and worth a fortune who'd crossed her path.

Having dated a King for two years, she should have been immune from nerves when it came to the opposite sex. Was there anyone more potentially intimidating than a royal? Only...Ares hadn't been intimidating. He'd been a friend first, and something like a friend the whole way through their relationship. It hadn't been his fault that she'd ended it.

On paper, he was perfect.

On the one hand, she had no doubt they would have been perfectly content if she'd stayed with him, and they'd gotten married in some big, over-the-top, royal wedding.

But the thought of living her whole life in that gilded cage had turned Louisa's blood to ice, and so she'd run away.

And she'd been ashamed of that—because Ares had deserved better. She'd angsted over how she'd let him down—and after all he'd lost in life. Only to have him fly in a week ago specifically to tell her that not three months after their breakup, he'd met the love of his life and was planning to propose.

Talk about being blindsided.

She'd left him.

She'd dumped him and flown to the other side of the world, to take up a client management role for a blue-chip advertising agency that was owned by one of her father's friends. She'd come here to lick her wounds and escape the press. She'd wanted Ares to be happy—but she had been shocked that he'd found happiness, with someone else, so soon after their breakup.

"It's not good enough," Noah Fox leaned forward, elbows braced on the table as he stared across at her in a way that was both intimidating and addictive. Not for the first time, she cursed her direct boss for failing to show up for the meeting.

The text message he'd sent as she'd walked into this boardroom had been about as unhelpful as it got:

Sorry, can't make it. You'll be fine. Remember, flatter, flatter, flatter, agree to everything, promise the world. I'll sort it out later.

Louisa wasn't sure she liked the idea of promising the world if the flighty Donovan was going to be left in charge of delivering on said promises. She was someone who valued the truth of her word, and the same could not be said for Donovan.

"You're unhappy," she said, trying to think less about Ares, and less about the incredibly symmetrical, angular face of the man across from her, and how much he reminded her of some kind of mountain range, and more about the fact he was one of the agency's biggest clients, and her job was to make sure he didn't take his business elsewhere.

"Damn straight." His Australian accent was broad and gruff. It made her think of the outback—a place she hadn't admittedly been but had fantasised about in her mind often enough to just somehow know that this man would be right at home in

the broad, sweeping plains of dust and dirt, the anemic trees casting eerie silhouettes against a strikingly blue sky. “I was told my ROI would be here,” he gestured with his hand. “And it, quite clearly, is not.”

“No,” she admitted, glancing down at the graphs Donovan had emailed her the night before, thankful she’d thought to print them out and bring them with her. “A few things haven’t gone quite according to plan,” she said, pulling her glossy brown hair over one shoulder.

“You can say that again.”

He was clearly annoyed, and she couldn’t blame him. He’d entrusted a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign to the agency, to launch his new chain of hotels, and several key angles had failed.

“The competition was badly run,” she conceded.

“You hired an influencer who was on charges for drink driving. Hardly an association I appreciated. Every paper across the country included my name in the first paragraph of the articles about her arrest, as though I’d hand-picked her.”

No one senior had hand-picked her, that was the problem. Donovan had left one of the interns to decide key matters, because ‘she’s young, she understands what’s going to work’. Otherwise known as: he couldn’t be bothered, and so he’d staffed out decisions he absolutely should have been making himself.

“That was regrettable.”

“Regrettable,” Noah’s barked laugh was a deep, throaty sound of disbelief. Raw and real. It made Louisa’s stomach roll, and possibly not from nerves. Beneath the table, she dug her fingernails into her palm. “It was a disaster, from beginning to end.”

“Yes.”

His eyes narrowed as he studied her face, almost as if for the first time. It was like he hadn't really registered her before now, but rather had seen her as just a suit, a representative for an agency he was on the brink of firing.

“You're not making excuses.”

Donovan would have. No doubt her boss would have had several handy little lies at his disposal, ready to save his own butt. But Louisa was not Donovan. She may have been hired because of nepotism, but she was good at managing people. Two years as a potential future Queen had taught her more than a thing or two about unruffling feathers and keeping her cool whilst doing it. She also knew how to read emotions, and she could tell that Noah Fox was not going to be impressed by smooth lies. He was no idiot, and there was no excuse for this.

So, she told him that.

“We stuffed up.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

His brows shot upwards, towards his thick, dark hair. “I’m sorry?”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, leaning forward slightly, her red lips pursed in a line of genuine remorse. “This has been bungled, and it is far below the standard our agency endeavors to deliver—and has successfully delivered for you in the past, over multiple campaigns,” she said, hoping that the goodwill from those previous jobs would go some of the way to keeping him on side. “We take full responsibility.”

“Good.” His approval, the note of appreciation in his voice, had her toes curling with something like pleasure. “Speaking of taking responsibility, where is Donovan?”

She glanced down at her papers, hating the question, because she didn’t want to lie to this client. Nor, though, did she relish the idea of throwing her boss under a bus. “Erm, I’m so sorry, but he couldn’t make it.”

“I see.” Noah’s lips compressed into a line that clearly communicated disapproval. “Somewhere more important he had to be?”

She grimaced. “I think he mustn’t be well,” she said because she had no idea why he had pulled out at the last minute. “But I promise you, the agency is determined to fix this.”

Noah reclined in his chair a little, studying Louisa’s face with an academic curiosity that turned her blood to lava. She tightened her fist in her lap and stared right back at him, even when the effort of holding his eye contact was doing strange things to her equilibrium.

“How?” he said, finally, his inflection mildly curious, rather than cross.

She expelled a soft sigh of relief, but she was floundering, because her job was to manage the client—to take them for long lunches, and charm them with her multiple languages and grasp of international politics. Her job was not to be across the details of each advertising campaign. Of course, she had a high-level understanding of each of her clients’ professional needs, but the minutiae was left to their advertising managers. Like Donovan. Who wasn’t there. Like Donovan, who’d just asked her to charm and promise and flatter her way out of this situation.

“We’ll start from scratch,” she said, thinking aloud. She wouldn’t make promises she couldn’t keep, or that Donovan would break. “A huge team meeting, today, to come up with a new plan, and Donovan can present it to you tomorrow. We’ll fix this, Mr Fox. I promise.”

“Noah,” he waved a hand through the air, whilst maintaining his disconcerting scrutiny of her face. “Where are you from?”

She compressed her lips, something like anxiety bubbling in her stomach. People in Australia didn’t recognize her proforma. Unlike in Moricosia, where she couldn’t have walked down the street without being trailed by paparazzi, or having well-meaning passersby pull out their cell phones to capture riveting footage of her buying milk. But when she mentioned her home country, sometimes, with some people, something twigged, and the fact she had been dating the King for two years, and had recently left him, filtered into their consciousness.

She didn’t like to be recognized for that one part of her life.

“I—Europe,” she hedged.

His brows drew inwards, so she knew he saw the response for what it

was—obfuscation.

“Do you travel much, Louisa?”

She liked the way he said her name. She liked it a dangerous amount. Her mouth was suddenly dry, her mind a little blank. She tapped her fingers to her knee, hoping it would bring mental clarity back to the fore. “I—have travelled, yes.”

“And stayed in hotels?”

She nodded once.

“Luxury hotels?”

She bit into her lower lip. He clearly didn’t know she’d been dating King Ares Christou Diamantis. Nor that she came from one of Moricosia’s oldest families. “From time to time,” she hedged again.

“Have you ever stayed in a Fox hotel?”

She thought back to her trip to Rome, and the spectacular hotel with the view of the Coliseum and the exceptional service. “Yes,” she said.

Curiosity sparked in his gaze. “Where?”

Her tongue darted out and licked her lower lip. “Rome.”

“Recently?”

She shook her head. It had been her one-year anniversary with Ares. She’d wanted to go somewhere, out of the country. Looking back, she’d never been cut out for the role



as his Queen. She'd been wanting to escape the pressures of royalty from almost the first.

“But you understand that guest satisfaction is at the forefront of what we promise and deliver. My family's business model is structured around being the kind of place that justifies the cost of our rooms.”

She nodded. She knew that, from the brief she'd been given when taking on this client, but also from personal experience. Also, just from being a human in the world, who saw that the Fox name was indeed synonymous with luxury, prestige, and pleasure.

Her mind stumbled a little, after giving her the last attribute. Heat flushed her cheeks, and she prayed it wasn't showing as a visible pink to the man across the boardroom.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

“Have you been to the hotel in Sydney?”

The heat became a full-blown inferno now as it spread through her whole body. How remiss of her not to have thought to go there, even for a lunch. It felt like a total ball drop—she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it. Or that Donovan hadn’t suggested it.

She grimaced inwardly as she shook her head.

His eyes sparked with something—she desperately hoped not disapproval.

“It’s hard to sell a product you don’t know.”

She couldn’t read him properly. One minute, she felt as though she was getting through to him and winning him over. The next, she felt as though he was building up to let the agency go.

“I’m not directly involved in advertising decisions,” she said, plaiting her fingers together in her lap. “My job is to take care of clients.”

He pulled a quizzical expression. “How, exactly?”

More heat. She felt as though she were being burned alive. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. About eighteen months into her relationship with Ares, things had started to look as though they were getting serious. The palace had stepped in with protocol lessons for her—which she’d hated—and one of the palace advisors had worked with Louisa on her speech, ensuring that little placeholders like ‘erm’

were banished forever. It was an unconscious habit for Louisa—and most people—but having been made aware of how often she sprinkled her sentence with such words, she had learned to keep them at bay now. For the most part.

“I am asking about your role at the agency,” he clarified when she didn’t speak.

Damn Donovan, she thought with frustration, feeling way out of her depth.

“I listen to client issues,” she said, carefully. “And make sure they’re communicated to the team. In this instance, I will absolutely make sure a total redesign of the strategy is brainstormed and brought to you tomorrow. You have my word, Mr Fox?—,”

“Noah,” he growled.

“Noah,” she closed her eyes a little. Because if she’d loved hearing him say her name, then the reverse was also very true. “Your business is incredibly important to us?—,”

“I can imagine it would be,” he drawled, “given what I’ve spent.”

She tried to think of something positive to say and remembered some more details from the report. “Online viewing has been good?—,”

“Clicks do not equate to bookings. Christmas is one month away—the hotel should be at full occupancy. Not to mention New Year’s. With the Sydney hotel’s view of the harbour, I would expect every room to have been booked out.”

“We should focus on those two things,” she said, tapping her fingertip against the edge of the desk. “Rather than the luxury of the hotel. Everyone knows Fox hotels are incredibly lovely; perhaps it was a mistake to make that the hallmark of the campaign.”

“Go on,” he prompted, leaning forward a little.

It was at that point she realized she’d overstepped. A lot. It wasn’t her job to come up with new campaigns. Her job was to schmooze clients and let the ad people do their work.

“I’m sure Donovan will have more ideas for you tomorrow.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t edit yourself.”

She blinked. “I’m not,” she lied.

“You are. You have ideas. I want to hear them.” He stared across at her. “Now.”

She flinched a little, mostly from the shock of warmth that spread through her. This time, it was a nice warmth, a tingly warmth that made her whole body feel a little like it could float in the air. She glanced at a point over his shoulder. What could she do? The client was asking her to keep going. Besides, Donovan would need to start from scratch. Was there any harm in pointing him in the right direction?

“I just think, you have such an advantage. You’re not a new chain of hotels, you’re already a hotel experience that people the world over aspire to enjoy. That’s a baseline understanding of what you offer. Beyond that, though, you can offer experiences. So, what does a Christmas at a Fox hotel look like? What do you do to make that special for guests?” Now, she was on a roll. She stood, without realizing it, pacing towards the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that showed incredible views of the world-famous Opera House. Noah’s office was definitely every bit as luxe as she

would have expected. “We should focus digital advertising on Europe and Canada. Places where people might be getting a bit fed up of the cold weather. Perhaps partner with the national airline, to create a package.” She turned back to face him. “Christmas in Australia is a completely different experience to what it’s like in Europe. While I understand there’s a craving for many locals, here, to head to Europe for the snow and pine trees and puddings, the same is true in reverse. We need to sell this,” she said, gesturing to the sparkling blue sky, the rush of sunlight flooding the room, the crystal-clear air. “All of the things that make an Australian Christmas so different, and so charming.”

He had angled his chair, so he could continue staring at her, but she barely noticed.

“As for New Year’s, we can switch gears. Let’s focus on the glamour of that. I think I saw that your hotel has a themed party organized?”

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He dipped his head once, in confirmation.

“Okay, so we sell the glitz and luxury of that. Let people feel like they’re movie stars for the night, by booking a suite in a Fox hotel.” She could imagine the campaign perfectly. Though her background wasn’t in advertising, she’d sat in on enough meetings in the past month to understand the way they structured these things. In truth, it was exciting to be the one coming up with the ideas.

She just hoped Donovan wouldn’t have a childish meltdown.

“In terms of long-term awareness, have you got the Sydney hotel featured on in-screen televisions across your network?”

His brow furrowed. “I’m not sure.”

“It would be a good thing to do,” she said, slipping easily into her role as future Queen, forgetting that she was no longer that. Nonetheless, the confidence she’d been taught to project came naturally to her now. “And we need to loop the PR team in. There should be more press around this,” she shuddered a little as she said it though, because the press was something she’d taken a dim view of, in recent months. “More press around you, around the fact you’re opening a flagship hotel in your home country. The Fox hotels are beloved the world over, and are finally coming home. There should be articles on what that means to you, on what it will mean for the city, on how many people you’re employing. Good news stories. It would be great if we could get a couple to get engaged in one of your hotels, and have it go viral,” she tapped a finger on the side of her mouth then realized he was staring at her and dropped her hand. She’d gotten carried away, brainstorming. Disaster.

“Obviously, the team will have a better idea of how to facilitate this,” she said, trying to remember what her role was today. None of this was her purview. “Donovan can?—,”

But Noah stood abruptly, and her mouth ceased making sound. Noah walked towards her, and all the air in the room seemed to disappear. Her mind went blank.

“Donovan is not a name I care to hear again,” Noah said, not angrily, but with determination. “You say your job is to manage clients?”

She nodded once, still not able to speak. He was barely a foot away from her. Up close, she could see the fibres in his shirt, smell the light hint of his fragrance, imagine what his skin would be like to touch. He had a swarthy complexion, and his jaw was lightly stubbled. Not intentionally, but almost as if he forgot to shave that morning. It was incredibly sexy, and her stomach popped with little bubbles of something like awareness.

She was appalled at herself. Firstly, he was a client. A very, very important client. Secondly, she’d literally just broken up with one of the most famous men in the world. It was not the time to be going gaga for anyone.

Only, her body hadn’t got the memo, because what had started as popping in her stomach had spread through her veins and manifested as a throb low in her abdomen and a tingling in her breasts. She swallowed quickly, seeking out calm.

“To keep clients happy?”

She nodded again.

“And I’m an important client to the agency, someone you want to keep happy?”

Her mind was spinning, but she nodded. “Of course.”

“Then let me be clear: there is only one way to fix this, and that’s for you to come and work for me.”

Her jaw dropped. She stared at him, aghast. “I’m flattered, but?—”

“This isn’t about flattery. I like the way your brain works. I like your passion, your commitment, and your honesty. You’re the person I want to run this launch, and I want you to do it from here, so I can work closely with you, each step of the way. This hotel launch is—important to me. I need it to go well.”

She wondered at the inflection in his voice, at the slight darkening of his eyes, the emotion in his face. It did seem important to him. Then again, the hotel would have cost hundreds of millions to build and get up and running. Hardly a casual investment. Naturally, he needed to see returns.

“I can’t leave the agency, Mr—Noah. You’re not my only client.”

“For the next six weeks, I will be.”

She stared at him. It was impossible to miss his natural authority. He spoke and she very much found herself wanting to say, ‘Yes, sir, of course, sir.’

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible.” Some strange self-preservation was making her demur, to cling to her job at the agency. “I can be involved in every aspect of your rollout, take a key role within the team, if you’d like.” She could imagine how Donovan would feel about that, but *c’est la vie*. This was about keeping Noah Fox on board. Besides, Donovan was the one who’d urged her to promise whatever she needed to. “But I can do that from the agency.”



Noah's eyes held hers for a long time. "I'll think about it," he said, finally, and she had a sinking feeling in her stomach that she might have failed after all.

"Noah—," But what could she say? She'd offered something that was fair and reasonable. Besides, she didn't have the experience to oversee a campaign like this. It was one thing to come up with ideas as a sort of lifeline, things that sounded good in theory. She had no idea if they'd actually work, nor how to implement them.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Louisa. It was a pleasure meeting you." And he held out his hand, in a clear gesture of finality. She stared at it as though it were a gauntlet she had to cross. For one thing, by shaking it, she was accepting that the meeting was over. On the other...it meant touching him.

Touching Noah Fox.

Just sitting across from him at the boardroom table had been enough to make her head spin.

Don't be stupid. It's just a handshake. Get a grip—literally. She chastised herself back to common sense and held out her own hand, glad that fireworks didn't explode into the room the moment they touched. Only as his fingers curled around hers, encasing her hand in the middle of his palm, she realized she was wrong. There might not be fireworks in the room, but inside of Louisa, everything started to tremble. His hand was warm and strong, his skin slightly calloused, which surprised her, because Noah Fox was a man who worked in boardrooms and slept in luxurious, million-thread count sheets. Why would his hands be calloused? She liked the way they felt though, so when he dropped her hand a moment later, she felt a searing, and strange, sense of emptiness. And a desire to reach out and grab his again, to hold it just a moment longer.

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He'd think she'd lost the plot.

"I'll be in touch," he said, and now she knew she blushed, because she'd been standing there like an idiot, staring at the hand he held at his side.

"Right. Thank you for your time, Noah." She walked towards the table and collected her document wallet and handbag, grateful beyond belief for the palace deportment lessons, which meant that even as her knees wanted to knock and her fingers itched to tremble, she didn't betray a hint of the inner turmoil he'd been able to spark with a single direct look and handshake.

### CHAPTER TWO

"CAN I SEE YOU IN my office, Louisa?" She had just put her handbag down at her desk when the phone buzzed and the voice of the agency owner came through.

One of her father's oldest friends, from university, she didn't feel the same need to impress Stuart Conroy as other staff did. She also didn't see him as a miserable curmudgeon, which he seemed to have the reputation of.

"Sure, I'll be right there."

She'd stopped for a coffee on the way back to the agency and grabbed it from her desk before making her way down the corridor and up the floating timber stairs that led to Stuart's glass-fronted office. Glass fronted, so he could keep an eye on his staff. With that being said, in his mid-fifties and having made his fortune twenty times over, Stuart was not often at his desk these days. And good for him, Louisa

thought approvingly. There was more to life than work. Out of nowhere, she imagined the future she'd imagined would be hers, the life she'd idly foreseen, when she and Ares had first started dating. It hadn't been a wildly passionate love affair, for either of them. It just hadn't been practical, given the strictures of dating a King. But they'd been good together. They'd made one another laugh. It had been so easy to envisage a rich, happy future at his side, with children and a puppy dog. But in those visions, Ares hadn't been King, and the publicity, protocol, and press were nowhere to be seen.

She knocked once at the door to Stuart's office. He glanced up and motioned with his hand for her to enter.

"You did well today."

She blinked, surprised. "I'm sorry?"

"I've just been speaking to Fox."

Her heart twisted sharply. She sipped her coffee to hide any tell-tale reaction.

"He likes you."

Her knees developed their own gravitational pull again. She ground her teeth, furious with her body for being so attracted to Noah Fox that even the mention of his name should heat up her blood.

"I'm glad. That's sort of the point, isn't it?"

"You're good at what you do."

"Thank you."

“He wants you to take over.”

Another slug of coffee. “He mentioned that.”

Stuart studied her, but unlike with Noah, Louisa could handle his scrutiny without a hint of tension.

“His business is worth a fortune if I’m frank. If you were anyone else, I’d be ordering you straight back to his office to set up shop.”

She stared at him. “You would?”

“But your father—,” he grimaced. “I promised him I’d look after you. I know what you’ve been through, Louisa. I don’t want to put you in any situation you’re not comfortable with. So, if working for Fox directly is a problem for you—,” he let the sentence hang there, a question implicit.

“It’s not that,” she said, a little breathlessly. “But I clearly don’t have the experience or skills to manage a campaign of that magnitude. Plus, I have other clients?—,”

“And I have other client managers,” he said. “You’ve only been here a month; I can easily redistribute your workload for the next little while.”

Her jaw dropped. “But I don’t know what I’m doing. I wouldn’t know where to start with something like this?—,”

“I know that. And I explained it to Fox. He’s adamant—he wants you at the top. What happened with Donovan?”

She opened her mouth to answer then clamped it shut. She felt a weird sort of loyalty to the man, even when he had landed her in it that morning, by failing to show up.

“It doesn’t matter,” Stuart waved a hand in the air. “I’ll talk to him later. As far as I’m concerned, this is a done deal, if you’re happy with that.”

## Page 6

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She moved a little unsteadily to the chair opposite Stuart and sat down, both hands gripping her coffee cup. “How would it work?” she asked, focusing on the facts at hand. “I’d need an exceptional team.”

“You’d have full hiring privileges. You can use whichever staff you want from the agency, and you can put out an ad for contractors if you need more.”

“But Stuart, I really don’t know what I’m doing. He looked like he was going to walk away, so I came up with some ideas on the fly?—,”

“He said they were the best ideas he’d heard all year, including from his overseas agencies. So, whatever you said, clearly impressed him.”

“He’s not in advertising either,” she pointed out, wishing her chest didn’t feel like it was swelling to bursting point with the compliment Noah had indirectly paid her.

“But I am, and I’ll work with you. If you’ll have me on your team,” he said, with a wink.

Stuart Conroy hadn’t built one of the most profitable advertising agencies in the southern hemisphere by accident. He was a natural at this stuff. Hardworking and gifted, he also operated fast, which Louisa liked.

“You don’t want to work full-time,” she reminded him. “Alice will kill me,” she nodded towards the wedding photo on his desk—his fourth wife, and definitely Louisa’s favourite. Alice was about ten years younger than Stuart, and she clearly adored him. “You’re supposed to be spending more time with her and Oscar.” Their

son—a three-year-old—had been a late in life surprise for both of them. But he was completely doted upon.

“It’s only six weeks,” he pointed out.

“Over Christmas.”

He waved a hand in the air. “By Christmas, the campaign will be running like a well-oiled machine. The crunch time is now. The next two weeks are where we really need to gear up. New creatives, ad spend through the roof, we need to film footage in the hotel.” She could already see Stuart’s brain was firing on all cylinders, but it was thrilling because it was just how she’d felt in Noah’s office. She could see the vision of what they needed to sell, and now she was being given a chance to actualize it.

“What do you say, Loulou?” He used her childhood nickname out of habit, though they’d agreed that here, in the office, they wouldn’t advertise their long-standing family friendship.

At least if she took up this opportunity, she wouldn’t have to deal with Donovan afterward. She had the feeling he would be an unpleasant adversary, and he’d be furious at having been removed from such a blue-chip contract.

“It’s important,” Stuart said, leaning forward. “The Sydney hotel is just the beginning. The outback ranch will open in March, and that’s going to be worth a fortune. Then, there’s the Gold Coast next year. I want to keep him on board, at all costs.”

Louisa nodded. Stuart had taken a chance on her when she’d needed to escape, and she wasn’t going to let him down. “Of course, I’ll do it. When do I start?”

“He’s already getting a desk set up for you. What’s that expression? There’s no time

like the present...”

Noah should have deleted the message after reading it the first time. He knew she didn't mean it. She was going through a phase.

The worst phase that had ever phased. If he had to hear his once-kind-and-loving daughter, now some kind of fifteen-year-old devil spawn, say one more lashing-out type thing, he was tempted to tear up the whole damned custody agreement.

Except, as if he could.

There was no way in hell he could send Taylor back to her mother. He might hate this stage of parenting, but he still loved Taylor, no matter how far out of line she was.

I hate you. I want to move back in with Mom.

Yeah, well, some days that was mutual. The problem was, Taylor's mother, and Noah's ex wife, happened to be leaning in hard to her alcoholism, and refusing to get help, no matter how hard he, and her family, tried. He had done everything he could, over the course of four years, to help her get sober. Every time he thought they were making headway, Amy would relapse. There'd been live-in therapists, long stints in rehab, meditation, hypnotism, absolutely everything that had been recommended had been attempted.

It never worked.

They'd broken up several years ago, but he'd known he couldn't desert Amy. Nor could he leave Taylor in her care, for any period of time, and he didn't want to sue for sole custody and make an already tenuous situation worse. He had stopped loving Amy a long time ago, but she was still Taylor's mother, and that meant something. Actually, it meant a lot. So, he'd stayed living under the same roof, albeit a totally



separate life. But when he'd come home from a business trip one day to find a passed-out Amy sprawled on the sofa, drug paraphernalia and alcohol bottles everywhere, and an oven that was just starting to smoke so badly he had no doubt the whole house would have caught fire if he hadn't arrived when he did, he'd known he had to remove Taylor completely from the situation and allow Amy the time to focus on herself.

He hoped she was using it wisely, but according to Amy's brother Adam, who Noah considered a friend, there was no real improvement.

Noah kept funding the therapy though, as well as the live-in housekeeper, who was responsible for keeping the house clean (and not burned down) and making sure no alcohol breached the doorstep. He was keeping everything crossed that something would help Amy get sober. He knew alcoholism was an illness, and he didn't judge his ex-wife. He just desperately needed to know his daughter was safe.

And not just in the physical sense.

Amy Fox had been a model slash actress before they'd married, and she habitually posted things on Instagram that were borderline inappropriate. He'd managed to keep Taylor off social media up until about a year ago, when she'd downloaded the app in secret and created an account. "You can't stop me, Dad. Thirteen is the age cut-off, anyway, and Mom says it's fine."

OfcourseAmy said it was fine. Amy had very little regard for how to keep their daughter safe. She also had no idea how brutalkids could be. Noah hated the idea of Amy's antics bleeding into Taylor's life; he wished there was some way he could keep his daughter insulated from that, from everything, for all time. He'd deleted the app, forbidden her from getting it again, and just hoped she'd listen to him.

He sighed heavily, dragging a hand through his hair.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

I hate you, he re-read, trying to imagine the giggling, chubby little three-year-old Taylor had been ever typing those words and sending them to him. Back then, parenting had been easy, and his marriage reasonably happy.

He'd been Taylor's hero and letting her snuggle into his lap while he read her a picture book had been the beginning and end of what she'd wanted in her day. She'd particularly loved *The Gruffalo*, and he'd read each page with the voices of the characters. When they reached the end, she'd clap her hands, look at him expectantly, and say, "Again?" He'd always relent, no matter what else he had on that evening. She was his daughter, and he would have moved heaven and earth for her.

He still would, but it was a lot harder to look forward to getting home at the end of the day when he never knew what particular kind of thunderstorm would be waiting to greet him.

So maybe he'd been a little harsher on Louisa from the agency than he'd needed to be.

Or maybe he hadn't been hard enough.

In truth, hot on the heels of the message from Taylor that morning, and with the abysmal response from the advertising campaign—which had resulted in sub-par bookings—he'd stormed into the meeting prepared to fire the agency, to hell with how well they'd done for him in the past.

He'd been livid. Admittedly, there'd been some splash back courtesy of his daughter's text, but mostly, it had been about Donovan and his incompetence.

Louisa—what was her last name? He looked down at the business card she'd pushed across the table in a flurry of apologies for Donovan's absence. Louisa Petrakis. Greek? Moricosian? No matter. Louisa Petrakis had succeeded in talking him off the ledge with her unexpected and beguiling habit of being honest. And brave. By taking responsibility for the agency's mess.

It was the trait he admired most of all. He didn't mind mistakes. Everyone made them. What he cared about was a person's ability to take responsibility and fix their mess.

His desk phone buzzed so he pressed the button to allow the intercom onto speaker.

"The suite of rooms are ready, sir, and Mr Conroy has informed me that Louisa Petrakis is on her way over."

"Excellent." He liked it when things went to plan, and his unflappable Sydney-based assistant Rose achieved that every time. She was worth her weight in gold. "Let me know when she gets here."

"Yes, sir."

He turned off the phone and pushed back in his chair, staring out at the view. It was a strikingly beautiful day, crystal clear, and very hot, so he'd gone for a run well before sunrise that morning, in an effort to escape the worst of the stifling heat. He was already looking forward to a swim after work.

Only, right as he imagined that moment of diving into his rooftop infinity pool, and letting the worries of the day slip over him, an image of Louisa popped into his mind. Not as she'd been that morning, in his office, dressed in a neat grey suit with her shiny hair pulled into a low ponytail. Not Louisa with her minimal makeup that highlighted the classical beauty of her face and features, with full, pouting lips,

dimples in her cheeks, and warm brown eyes. Not Louisa with perfectly trimmed nails and obvious fear that she was about to lose an important client.

But as she might look at his home, totally relaxed and in a bathing suit, diving into the water beside him, her skin gleaming from sunshine and water, her smile broad as she turned to him and laughed.

He sat up straighter as the unintended image infiltrated his body and began to take hold, flooding him with a kind of need he hadn't known in a long time. A very long time.

When had he last been with a woman, much less looked at one? He stood up quickly, trying to rid himself of a very unwelcome awareness, suddenly, of Louisa as a woman, and groaned to realise that his body had other ideas. He rearranged himself in his pants, grateful to be alone, because he definitely didn't need anyone else catching him with a visible erection.

His phone buzzed once more. He clicked the button, hoping the sound of Rose would do the trick. She was not someone he'd ever found remotely desirable, even though, he supposed, she was quite pretty.

"Sir, Miss Petrakis is here. Shall I send her in?"

"No!" He responded, glancing downwards with shock. Then, cursing inwardly, he shook his head. "Give me two minutes, then I'll meet her in the foyer. I've just got...something I'm dealing with first."

"No problems." Rose disconnected the intercom, and he tilted his head back with a weary laugh.

Great.

Just great.

He'd found the solution to his advertising issue; he was sure of it. Only Louisa Petrakis still might turn out to be more trouble than she was worth, if he wasn't very, very careful.

He strode into the foyer at the exact moment the sun seemed to burst through the glass, like an arrow of gold, spearing him and bathing him in the sort of light that would stay in her memory for a long time. If she was a painter, she would have itched to pick up a canvas and render his image, exactly like this, for all time.

He was...beautiful. There was no other word for it. From his angular, symmetrical face to those deeply expressive eyes, his patrician nose and sculpted cheekbones, and a body that was lean yet strong, she felt his beauty on a powerful, soul-deep level. Anyone on earth would have recognized his physical traits, but it was so much more than that.

Noah Fox's particular brand of beauty was like a magnet, and the closer he came to her, the more he sent whatever magnets inhabited her cells into total disarray, so they were jangling and jumping all over the place, making her jumpy and over-alert.

"Hi," she said, her voice husky and low, and totally unprofessional. Her eyes flared wide and she grimaced. "Hello," she tried again, then wished she hadn't when Noah's lips quirked in an appreciative smile.

Was he laughing at her?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

“Hi, hello, yourself,” he said, only slightly teasing.

She crossed her arms over her chest, then wished she hadn’t when, for the very briefest of moments, his gaze dropped downwards, landing somewhere near her cleavage before returning to her face once more.

“Thanks for agreeing to this,” he said, gesturing towards the bank of elevators.

She slid him a sidelong glance, thought about holding her tongue before remembering how much he appreciated honesty. “Well, you really didn’t leave me much choice,” she pointed out, warmth spreading through her when he laughed in reply.

His laugh was like him—raw and real.

“True. When I know what I want, I pull whatever lever is necessary to get it.”

It was a totally innocuous comment, as it pertained to the situation at hand, but because he was so damned beautiful, and she couldn’t stop thinking about how beautiful he was, the comment hit her on a whole other level. It was just so sexy. And yet, it wasn’t as though Ares hadn’t been similar. He’d walked into a room and called the shots; he’d always been like that. So why hadn’t that trait, in Ares, set her pulse on fire, the way it did with Noah? Maybe it was his Australian accent? Yes, that had to be it. He reminded her of every stereotypical bush-hardened Aussie she’d ever seen on the screen or read about in books. There was something so wild about him, so feral. And she liked it.

The discovery was kind of shocking, because Louisa had always valued, above all

else, civility and manners. In that way, she'd been the perfect Queen-in-waiting. It had all come so naturally to her. Except for the public's interest in her, which had started as tolerable but had devolved, over the course of two years, into a sort of paralyzingly intense experience that made it almost impossible to leave the house.

And now, she could breathe again. Finally.

"You're not annoyed, are you?" He swiped a key in the lift and the doors swooshed closed. The cubicle began to ascend but Louisa was barely conscious of the fast progress upwards.

It was not a small lift. Like everything in the building, it was obviously first-rate. But it was still a small enough space for Noah's closeness to her to resonate like an electrical current.

She glanced across at him and felt her stomach drop to her toes. She could have lied to herself and pretended that it was courtesy of the lift, but truth was the theme of the day, and she knew it was all down to the man opposite.

"I'm not annoyed, no," she answered, the words husky and soft. She told herself to look away, to smile distractedly, to comment on the weather—it was a very hot day, after all. But instead, she just stared at him, like some kind of fool, and weirdly, he stared back. It was like they were sinking into one another, whilst neither of them moved. Her whole body seemed to be tingling and lifting with goosebumps, and just like when one experienced a sudden rush of cold, her nipples charged with a fizz of electrical current. It was such an overwhelming sensation, she almost gasped.

"I'm glad." His words seemed to come from a long way away. She didn't know what he was saying, but she didn't care. She stared at his mouth, her own mouth going dry as she imagined, completely out of nowhere, what it would be like to be kissed by Noah.

She imagined him doing exactly that, now. Here. Kissing her slowly at first, then harder, more demandingly, stepping forward and pressing her back against the lift, his fingers gliding over the emergency stop button, like men did in movies, to give them more time together. She imagined his leg wedging between hers, and his hands lifting her shirt from the band of her trousers, so he could brush against bare flesh.

The image was so erotic and so fully formed that she was almost at risk of melting into a puddle of desire, right at his feet.

Oh, God. The thought of falling to her knees in front of him and taking him...she closed her eyes as that very, very inappropriate and erotic image flooded her whole body with a sensual charge she could hardly ignore.

She took a hasty step backwards, pressing her own back to the wall of the elevator, as though the metal and glass might cool her down.

Yeah, right.

The doors pinged open, and Louisa had never been more grateful for something in her whole life. Only Noah didn't immediately move. Instead, he kept staring at her, so she no longer wanted the wall to cool her down, nor swallow her up, but rather for him to step forward and turn her unbidden fantasies into a reality.

His hand snaked out and for a moment, she thought he might hit the button she'd been imagining him touching. Instead, he pressed his flattened palm against the doors and nodded towards the reception area. "After you."

It was a curt dismissal, except for the sound of his voice. Strained. Woolen. As though he too had been lost in thoughts that did not belong anywhere near this, and what they were.



She left the elevator quickly, never more grateful for all those deportment lessons that meant she was able to at least look like a professional woman striding into a new job, rather than how she felt: a total slick of desire, trembling with need for a man she barely knew.

### CHAPTER THREE

“THIS IS ROSE,” he gestured to a very neat-looking woman, perhaps in her thirties, with curly blonde hair and big blue eyes. She wore red eyeglasses and a sage green dress, that made the caramel colour of her skin pop. “She basically keeps my life on track in every way imaginable. I’d be lost without her.”

Rose rolled his eyes. “Watch out. He only flatters like that when he needs something.”

Noah clutched a hand to his chest. “I’m wounded.”

Rose flicked a smile in his direction before turning her attention to Louisa. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

For a second, panic slicked Louisa’s insides, completely and utterly replacing the lingering feelings of warmth that had been rolling around inside of her, since that moment in the elevator. Imagined or not, it had certainly left an impression.

But then, she hadn’t imagined the way his eyes had lingered on her face, even once the doors had opened. Nor had she imagined his sharp intake of breath as she’d brushed past him to leave.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

Louisa was used to being known and recognized, but so far Sydney had been a haven for her. Even after Ares's unexpected visit the week before, she'd still been able to fly under the radar. The local papers hadn't even run the story about his visit—thank heavens for small mercies—though anyone who went online would be able to find all the sneaky long lens photos and the conjecture about Ares's reason for coming to see her.

“I was explaining your advertising vision to Rose,” Noah supplemented, and when Louisa glanced across at him, there was a look in his features that she could have sworn mimicked embarrassment.

But that made zero sense.

“Shall I show you through to your command centre?” Rose offered.

“I like the sound of that,” Louisa said with a smile of her own. “That would be?—,”

“That's okay, Rose. I'll do it,” Noah's voice came over the top of Louisa's. “Don't trouble yourself.”

Rose glanced at him with obvious surprise, before lifting one shoulder in a shrug. “Okay. I have more than enough to be getting on with, anyway.” She turned back to Louisa. “But I'm here if you need anything. My extension is number forty-seven. Just pick up any phone and dial it to be put through to me.”

“Thank you,” Louisa said with a sigh of genuine relief. She was sure she was going to be relying on Rose a little more than the other woman potentially realized.

“This way.” Noah’s hand in the small of her back came as a total surprise—and not an unwelcome one. It was the barest brush of his hand to her jacket, simply to guide her away from the reception desk, but it was also moving them closer and closer to the fantasy that had flooded her mind in the elevator, so she almost groaned.

“My office is through there,” he gestured to two wide doors. “And you’ll be in here.” He pushed open a door just down the hallway from his own, to reveal a spacious office with views that rivaled those of the boardroom, on the floor beneath them.

“Wow,” she said, taking a moment to appreciate the outlook, striding across the carpeted floor and putting her hands on her hips, oblivious to the way the sun silhouetted her figure in a way that Noah couldn’t help but notice. “This is so beautiful.” She turned to face him. “Do you still see it, or are you so used to it you don’t notice?”

He walked towards her, and her heart leaped into her throat. “I see it,” he said, his eyes on the view. That didn’t matter, though. He came close enough to her that she could smell the subtle hint of his cologne and her whole body throbbed in response.

“Have you lived in Sydney long?” she asked, surprised by her sudden interest in small talk and recognizing it for what it was. Nervousness, but also, a desire for him to stay with her a little longer.

“We moved here about eighteen months ago.”

Her heart skidded into her throat. We.

Of course he was a ‘we’. As if someone like Noah Fox would be single. What was she thinking? She nodded quickly, dismissively. “Well, thank you for?—,”

“My daughter and me,” he interrupted to clarify, and now her heart leaped from her

throat into her brain and mouth and fingertips and knees. It seemed to be everywhere in her body, all at once.

“Oh,” she said, looking up at him and feeling as though she were sinking into quicksand. She couldn’t look away, and nor, apparently, could he. There was only one reason he’d clarify that the ‘we’ in question had been his daughter, and not a partner. The answer, unfortunately, opened a whole can of worms that Louisa knew they should keep closed.

“She’s fifteen. It’s a whole thing. Teenage girls. I’m woefully ill-equipped to deal with it.” His smile was lopsided and utterly charming. Every part of her seemed to melt in the face of it. Even more so when she perceived the genuine look of stress around his eyes.

“Can her mother help?” Okay, she was being nosy. Or perhaps she was being cautious. The last thing Louisa wanted was to find herself in the middle of a marital dispute.

“No.” The answer was stern, a whip-like inflection, almost like a curse. He made a visible effort to relax. “Taylor’s mother is dealing with her own issues right now. She’s not really in the picture, for the moment.”

Louisa’s heart twisted for the teenager. “That must be hard on both of you.”

“My marriage ended a long time ago,” he answered, his eyes boring into hers. Like he needed her to understand that. As though it was vitally important, on some level. “I had no problems walking away from Amy. But Taylor is her daughter. She’s a child, who doesn’t understand the very adult reasons I had for doing what I did, and I want to protect her mother as much as possible, because one day, I hope they can have a relationship. Which means Taylor sees me, right now, as the devil.” He pulled a face and laughed a little awkwardly. “I’m sorry. You came here to work, not to be my

therapist.”

“It’s fine,” she rushed to reassure him. And it really was. She liked hearing him talk. She would have happily listened to him reciting a recipe book, in fact. But hearing him talk about something as important and private as his family life was a whole other level of addictive. “I know a thing or two about teenage girls myself.”

He arched a brow, in silent enquiry.

“I was one, once upon a time,” she said with a smile.

“And were you a handful, Louisa?” He had moved a little closer, without her realizing it, and the inflection in his question hinted at a double entendre, or at least a yearning to learn more about her than she had shared.

“Actually, I was pretty much a poster child,” she said with an apologetic smile. “But I have a twin sister who definitely delighted in giving my parents the runaround. Grace spent from around fourteen to seventeen bending every rule we had, until they broke, and then refusing to clean up the mess afterwards. She was a nightmare.”

He wasn’t touching her, but the way he was looking at her face warmed her all over, in the same way she might have felt if he’d reached out and stroked her.

“And now?” he asked, the words soft, so she had to lean forward a little to hear what he was asking.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

Louisa thought of her sister, grateful to have something tangible she could reflect on, something to tether her to the real world and her life outside of Noah. A man she'd met only that morning, and was suddenly occupying a tremendous amount of her brain power.

"She's a wonderful person," Louisa promised. "I mean, she always was, but for Grace, the whole teen rebellion thing seemed like a compulsion, rather than a descriptive phase. 0Terrorising our parents wasnotoptional."

"And what did you do, Louisa, while all hell was breaking loose around you?"

Louisa flushed with a hint of embarrassment at what a square she'd been. "I ignored it," she said, though it was so much more than that. She'd studied, worked, shone when her sister screwed up, making sure she never put a foot wrong, because her parents wouldn't be able to cope with two daughters going off the rails at the same time. Louisa's life had been an exercise in colouring inside the lines. She had been a 'good girl', designated by all who knew her, from the day of her birth, right up until now.

"So I can't really give you advice from my personal perspective?—,"

"Someone you love leaned into the whole teenage disaster thing and you had to watch from the sidelines? It sounds like you're exactly the person to help. Are you free tonight?"

She stared at him, her insides rolling. "Tonight?"

“For dinner.”

It wasn't a date. It wasn't a date. He was her client, and he was asking for help with his daughter. Technically, this fell into the job description, didn't it? Her role was to make their clients happy, however she could, and Noah Fox clearly wanted to talk about his daughter's rebellion.

“I—yes. I can do that,” she agreed, even before she'd decided she would.

“Great. Give Rose your address and I'll come pick you up. How's eight o'clock?”

A little later than Louisa usually went out, these days. Then again, she'd been a total hermit for at least the last six months. Before leaving Ares, the press attention had reached fever pitch, meaning she'd spent the northern hemisphere summer between the palace and her flat, barely braving even a trip to the supermarket. After they'd broken up, she'd been running away, and running away was just easier to do when you didn't make friends or connections. Every night, she went back to her empty flat, ate a microwave meal with a small glass of wine, then curled up on the sofa and fell asleep whilst watching re-runs of ER.

Hardly the stuff of single-girl excitement.

Technically though, she was nursing a broken heart. Or at least, she should have been, never mind that she didn't feel heartbroken, having left Ares, so much as shell-shocked at how wildly her life had veered off the course she'd presumed, up until around six months ago, it would take.

“Louisa? Eight okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Yes. I can do that. I'll see you then.” She just wished her voice hadn't sounded so husky!

“I don’t need a damned babysitter,” Taylor stamped her foot for good measure.

“Language, Taylor,” he said, sharply.

Taylor’s laugh was cruelly mocking. “Damn, damn, damn. God, Dad, you’re such a loser. It’s not even a swear word.”

“In my house, it is. I don’t want to hear it out of your mouth again, young lady.”

Young lady? Young lady? What was happening to him? He felt wound up tighter than a coil. He felt fit to burst. He felt like Taylor had called him, a loser.

“For fu?—,”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” he snapped, and for once, Taylor listened to him. But she slammed her hands on her hips and glared at him as though she wished he’d shrivel up and die. He couldn’t remember ever feeling this way about his own father and stepmother. He’d gone through the teen years pretty much without incident. A few cracks in his voice, a heap of extra inches in height, he’d started to fill out his frame and get hair on his legs and in all the places grown men had it, and then, bam. He was done.

It was very easy to imagine that Taylor got this rebellious side from her mother.

“I’m fifteen years old.”

“I’m aware of that. I was in the hospital the day you were born.”

She rolled her eyes. “Gross.”

His nostrils flared as he tried to contain his temper. “Kristen is not your babysitter.



She's my housekeeper."

"Oh, and there's some urgent laundry matter she needs to attend to at seven thirty in the evening? Doesn't she have a life of her own?"

"Keep your damn voice down."

“Language, Noah.”

He could have screamed. He could have shouted every curse word he knew. Instead, he sucked in a deep breath and crossed his arms over his chest. “You are going to go to your room and do some homework. When you’ve decided you can be polite and civil to Kristen, who will be here until I get back, you may join her for dinner.”

“Oh, gosh, howkindof you. What a benevolent jailer you are, to permit me time to walk to my own kitchen and eat a meal.” She rolled her eyes again for good measure.

“Or you can stay in your room and act like a two-year-old having a tantrum. It’s up to you.”

Nothing took the wind out of a teen’s sails like being called a toddler, he’d come to realise.

“I hate you,” she hurled at him, but to his relief, she did turn on her heel and stalk towards the stairs, which led to her bedroom.

“Good night, Taylor,” he called to her retreating back. He was pretty sure she moved her hand in a very rude gesture in response.

He sagged against the wall afterward, totally sapped by the argument. By all the arguments. He almost couldn’t bear the way she spoke to him, the way she really did seem to hate him.

And just like that, the pleasurable anticipation he’d been feeling all day, at the

prospect of taking Louisa to dinner, evaporated. He still wanted to see her, but he wasn't sure he wanted her to see this version of him. He felt infuriated and devastated, all at once.

Even if she hadn't been expecting him, Louisa somehow would have known that Noah would drive this kind of car. A sleek SUV, she saw as it drew nearer that it was a prestigious European brand. It was a gunmetal grey, matte in colour, with darkly tinted windows, and the hubcaps had the kind of shine indicating they'd never been crunched into the gutter. She waited on the footpath—somehow it felt less intimate than being inside and having him ring the doorbell—so saw the moment he turned the corner.

And her pulse leaped accordingly, whoosh, bang, whoosh, like a river racing, rushing, threatening to burst its banks.

He pulled over and cut the engine, stepping out of the car. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting him to wear—maybe still his suit? But instead, Noah had changed into dark denim jeans, a pair of loafers, and a pale blue button-up shirt, with the collar a little raised at the back and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing his tanned, toned forearms to her very thirsty gaze.

She tried to swallow but found her tongue was too thick, or something. Instead, she took a step forward and mortifyingly held her hand out to shake. He gave her one of those lopsided smiles, albeit a little tight, then took it. Only unlike their handshake earlier that day, this was different. Slower. Everything was slower, from the blinking of her eyes to the curve of her lips to the way the light summer breeze seemed to lift her hair off her neck and pull it away from her face.

“Hey,” she said, her fingertips sparking from his touch.

“Hey,” he repeated, his hand still holding hers. He let go then, but he gave her hand a

little squeeze first. It was unlike any other handshake she'd ever been a party to.

"Where are we?—,"

"Do you mind if we?—,"

They started, and stopped, talking at the same time.

"You go," she said, flushing to the roots of her hair. She felt like a teenager, going on her first date. But this wasn't a date, she had to remind herself forcibly. Just as she'd had to remind herself when she'd chosen what to wear for tonight and ended up opting for a pair of linen shorts and a singlet top. It was casual, but still somewhat professional. Okay, she'd always thought the shorts flattered her figure and the singlet was dipped a little low at the front, and she knew this shade of peach flattered her skin tone, but so what? Was it a crime to want to look your best?

"I was going to ask if you particularly wanted to eat out?"

She looked at him, not completely understanding. "You want to cancel...this?"

"No, no," he replied, so quickly and forcibly that she almost lost her breath, because he clearly didn't want to cancel. Not even a little bit. Which meant, she hoped, that he was looking forward to this as much as she was.

"So—," she prompted, waiting for him to explain.

"I have reservations at Harry Hanks," he said, referring to one of the premiere restaurants in Sydney. She knew that because she'd taken clients there when they were in need of schmoozing.

"Lovely," she said, thinking of the huge open space with views out over Bondi with a

strange lack of enthusiasm. While the restaurant was exceptional it was still very...peopley. And she wasn't sure she was in the mood for people.

His brow furrowed. "We can go there, if you'd like. It's just?—,"

"Yes?" She asked, again resenting her voice for coming out all husky, eager, and intimate.

"To be frank, I've just had a huge argument with Taylor, and I'm pretty bloody steamed up." He laughed, but it was heavy with stress. "I was wondering if you'd be interested in just walking around a bit?"

The sun had only set in the last twenty minutes or so, and the sky was still tinged with a hint of orange. "I'm happy to walk," she said because she was. She didn't have his reason, but at the same time, it felt as though she was bursting apart at the seams, and she wasn't sure a restaurant could contain her.

"Are you sure?"

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:29 am*

“I’m sure. But do you mind if I go change my shoes?” She glanced down at her high heels with a look of remorse. “These are ever so slightly less into walking than I am.”

His smile was dazzling, just as it had been that morning. Her heart did a funny little poppety pop. She dug her fingernails into her palm, seeking sanity and a dose of reality.

“No worries.”

They stared at one another.

“Should I?—,”

“Did you want?—,”

She burst out laughing. “This is getting ridiculous. What were you saying?”

“I’ll wait here if you’d like.”

She hesitated a moment, knowing that was the smart decision. The only decision that one hundred per cent guaranteed she wouldn’t do something exceptionally stupid, like beg her very, very important client to kiss her, just this once, so she knew if his lips felt as good as she imagined they might.

“You can come up,” she said, throwing caution, and wisdom, to the wind. She’d been a good girl for such a long time. All her life. It was tempting to flirt, if just for a moment, with the idea of being a little bit bad after all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“NICE PLACE,” he said, as she slipped off her heels and pulled out a pair of sandals instead.

She glanced up at him and her heart jolted in her chest.

“Yes,” she agreed, forcing her gaze beyond him, to the pretty apartment she’d rented even before leaving Moricosia. She’d put the pieces in place carefully for her escape, aware that fleeing the speculation of the dedicated European paparazzi was not going to be easy. She’d rented the place in her mother’s maiden name, to avoid detection. “I like it.”

“Have you been here long?”

She finished buckling the first sandal then moved to the second. When she looked up at him, in between, his eyes were resting on her tanned legs, and his brow was furrowed. She kept looking at him, sandals temporarily forgotten, as his eyes shifted up her body, finally landing on her face, and his frown deepened.

Her fingers shook a little as she returned to the task at hand—feeding the leather tongue through the metal buckle and fastening it. Such an easy, repetitive job, and yet she was completely uncoordinated that evening.

“Need help?” He asked, in what might have been a teasing voice if it weren’t for the tension zapping between them.

Her eyes locked to his and her mouth went dry; she found it impossible to answer verbally, so she just stared at him and did something that must have been a nod, because a moment later he’d taken the three necessary steps to bring him level to her and crouched down at her side. His hands were warm and strong as one gripped her

ankle and the other mastered the leather strap of the shoe, doing what she'd struggled with.

"I've done it a thousand times," she said, a little unevenly, and defensively. She felt silly. "I just?—,"

"Couldn't concentrate?" He asked, and this time, his lip quirked with the hint of a smile, and his brow lifted in a conspiratorial inquiry.

"Something like that," she mumbled, dropping her gaze to her thighs.

His hand shifted from her now buckled sandal to her chin, tilting it so their eyes were level. "I'm in the same boat." It was a cryptic response. Unless it wasn't? Unless he meant exactly what he'd said, and he was struggling to concentrate in all the ways she was—because of her?

He stood abruptly though and held a hand down for her to take, to aid her in getting up off the floor. She put her hand in his, and when he pulled her to standing, their bodies were separated by only an inch. The whole world seemed to shake.

She just stood there, staring up at him, aware of the ticking of the clock in the hall, the night birds making whooping noises, the warmth of her apartment. If they didn't get out of there, she had no idea what was going to happen. And yet...

"We could just get something delivered?" she heard herself say, despite the obvious lack of wisdom in that idea. Being out with Noah was probably the only way to make sure she wouldn't do something really stupid. "Though my sandals would be disappointed to miss a walk around."

He smiled again and her stomach swooshed. "Well, we can't have that," he said, with mock seriousness. "How about we split the difference and walk somewhere local to



grab food, and bring it back here?”

She bit into her lip. “The best of both worlds? I like how you think, Mr Fox.”

“I’m not someone to settle for disappointment, Miss Petrakis.”

“I can see that about you.”

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“Can you?”

She nodded once, lost in the mesmeric quality of his gaze. Her whole skin seemed to be lifting with goosebumps.

“I passed a street back that way that looked to have a heap of places.”

She nodded slowly, finding it hard to shake the fog that had settled around them. “I know the one.”

Still, neither of them moved.

“It’s such a warm night,” she said, after a beat, partly to fill the silence and partly because she felt as though she were burning up.

“This time of year is, yeah.” He skimmed her face with his eyes. “Too hot to walk?”

“No, I like it. I was just...”

“Making conversation?” he prompted, and again, there was that lift of his lips, and her heart twisted.

“Yes,” she shrugged though, and it seemed to break her spell, at least for the moment. She reached around for her handbag and slung it across her body. “Ready?” she asked, turning to face him, then wishing she hadn’t when their eyes met and she felt the magnetic pull of her attraction to him.

It was far from ideal, but impossible to ignore.

“Let’s go.”

Outside, it was properly dark now, but the moon was full and the street lighting sufficient to provide a lovely glow as they walked, slowly, the few blocks to the dining precinct in this fashionable, old part of Sydney.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, glancing up at him.

He slid her a look. “Not yet. I’m actually having a nice time, which I hadn’t expected at all.”

One of Louisa’s brows shot up. “Gosh, how flattering.”

His laugh was a gruff rumble, and he held up a placating hand. “I mean because of the mood I got in after fighting with my daughter. Nothing to do with you.”

She nudged him with her shoulder, in a teasing way, and it was at that moment that she realized two things: her protocol training had not completely rewired her instincts, because no way could Future Queen Louisa have done something so silly and flippant. And she was definitely ready to throw caution to the wind, at least for tonight, and have some fun with Noah Fox. Your client, the sensible part of her brain tried to remind her. She knew that, but at the same time, there was something about Noah that made it easy to separate their working relationship and whatever this was.

Or maybe it was just that her ego was so badly battered, her heart so bruised, after everything she’d been through in the last few months, that the prospect of spending a few nice hours with a very good-looking man, who obviously thought she was at least passably attractive, was helping wash away that hurt and discombobulation.

“You didn’t answer my question before.”

“No?” The moon made his features all the more compelling and angular. She found it hard to look away, and therefore almost walked into a child on a scooter, riding ahead of his parents. She might have done so, if Noah hadn’t reacted quickly, reaching out and putting a hand around her waist, pulling her towards him.

Into him.

Against him.

So their bodies were melded and she barely heard a woman’s voice shouting, “Andrew, you have to watch out for people!” Then, “Sorry,” as she fast-walked by them.

Noah mumbled something, but Louisa didn’t hear it. How could she? Her head was filled with fuzzing and popping and static electricity like the whole world had ceased to make any kind of sense. She was only aware of how close they were, how warm he was, how strong and muscular and lean, how safe she felt with his arm wrapped around her, how her pulse was rushing and her heart thumping, and could he feel that through their clothes?

“Louisa—,” her name was almost a plea on his lips, a growl and a wish.

She stared up at him and felt the slowing down of time. The needs and wants of the entire world seemed to have pooled inside Louisa in that moment, so she lifted a hand to his chest, wanting to pull him lower, wanting to drag his lips to hers. Those lips she’d been fantasizing about and needed to know how they felt.

“You’re okay?” he asked, his voice still low.

She nodded slowly.

“Good.”

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And to her chagrin, he let her go. The instant emptiness was astounding. It was as though her body, in those twenty or so seconds, had become totally fused to him. She wanted to shout and scream. She wanted to give into the frustration that was curdling her blood.

She'd walked away from Ares and an almost certain engagement three months ago, but in reality, she'd walked away from herself a long time before that. How quickly after they'd started dating had Louisa needed to focus on who she was meant to be, rather than who she was? It wasn't as though her personality changed completely, but rather, she became used to showing only one side of herself—the polished, elegant, unemotional woman best suited for that role, and that was what she focused on. But in doing so, she'd lost her vivacity and spontaneity, she'd lost her sense of fun.

All the while, she'd seen Grace's TikToks from her different modelling assignments, all over the world, and her silly videos with friends, taken at three in the morning as they had competitions over who could eat the most outrageous burger combinations, or walk with books on their head for the longest, and Louisa had always felt wistful. Because there'd been no scope in her life for that kind of fun.

This, with Noah, was spontaneous. And yes, she had fun with him. She felt like her old self around him, in fact. Confident, natural, she didn't need to second guess what she was saying, she didn't need to worry about offending anyone, or stepping out of line, missing some kind of protocol beat.

Not that Ares had ever made her feel like that. He'd been very supportive, and totally accepting of her. But the pressures of the role, the history, had all seemed like a weight, pressing down on Louisa, and with each day, that weight had made cracks in

her confidence and sense of self until she'd reached breaking point.

"What was your question?" she said, as they started to walk again, slower this time, as though each subconsciously wanted to relish the journey.

"How long have you been here?"

"In Sydney?"

He nodded once.

"A little over a month."

He glanced at her, his expression analytical. "That's not long."

"No. And yet, in some ways, it feels like a lifetime."

They turned a corner right as a car came towards them and for a second, the flash of the car's headlights landed right on them, so Louisa felt a rush of adrenaline and an instinct to cover her face. To run. Because it was so reminiscent of the photographers who'd stalked her every move.

"You okay?"

Of course, Noah had noticed, because he didn't miss anything.

She grimaced. "Old habits. I thought the car was...something else."

"You're as white as a sheet. Do you need to sit down?"

She laughed, but not with humour so much as frustration. "Honestly, I'm fine. It just

brought back bad memories.”

Noah was quiet as he considered that. They went by a shop selling upholstered furniture, and Louisa saw the same armchair in the window that had been there for weeks. It was a pretty blue chair, with gold piping. Old fashioned but somehow whimsical, and there was something about it that she adored.

“Are those bad memories related to why you’re in Sydney?”

He hadn’t let it go. He was curious. That made sense. “Yes,” she said, simply, and smiled at him, because all of that seemed like a long time ago, now.

“Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “It’s not that I don’t want to,” she explained. “I just don’t need to.”

They walked a little further in silence.

“So, you’re the fourth generation in your family to run the hotels, huh?”

He nodded. “I took over from my father, who took over from his father, and so on and so on.”

Her smile was wry. She had more than a passing understanding of hereditary lines of business.

“But you have brothers?”

“Two younger, and a cousin who grew up with us.”



“What do they do?”

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“Max—he’s a year younger than me—is group CEO. He’s more interested in the businesses that are overseas. The hotels make up a part of the holdings, but he stays out of my side of things, and I stay out of his. Lucas, he’s two years younger than Max, has his own business. He’s in New York. Our cousin Christopher is only a couple of months younger than Max. He’s an investor.”

“An investor?”

“He inherited a fortune when his parents passed away. My parents were adamant that he should live with them, and not his mother’s side of the family.”

“Why?”

“Because of the fortune his legal guardians would have at their disposal,” he said. “Money isn’t new to us, but it would have been to them. They were worried it would be corrupting.”

She considered that. “Did they still get to see him?”

“My parents weren’t monsters,” he said, with a laugh. “They also wanted Chris because they loved him, and they wanted him to have as normal a life as possible, after such an awful loss.”

She thought of Ares, and how the sudden death of his parents and brother had totally changed his world, as a fifteen-year-old boy.

“How old was he, when they died?”

“Seven.”

She winced. “So, you really would be like brothers to him?”

“As he is to us.”

“Did you grow up in Sydney?”

“Nah,” he said, in that uniquely Australian way. It made her smile. She tried to imagine what a protocol officer might make of it and couldn’t, so gave up. “Not when I was little, anyway. We have a property, out west. Big, open, dusty, dry. Beautiful.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure that’s what I’d go for on the advertising material.”

He grinned down at her. “There’s a dam which is always full, thanks to a deep bore. Our family’s money originally came from cattle farming, and it’s always been sort of important to us—we can’t give it up. My parents have this thing about not forgetting your roots, not forsaking your heritage.”

“So, who runs the cattle farm?”

“My folks.”

“Your folks?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I just thought?—,”

“They were dead?” He laughed then. “How old do you think I am?”

“It’s not that,” she assured Noah, joining him in a soft laugh. “It’s just, you all run the businesses...”

“My dad retired as soon as he could. After his brother died, he knew the responsibility of running everything on his own. He was very glad to pass the baton.”

“How old are you though?” She blurted out. “I mean, you have a fifteen-year-old...”

His face changed immediately, so she regretted having asked the question. They turned the corner again, and the whole street filled with life and sound. At least ten restaurants sat on either side of the wide road, and they were all full, with patrons spilling out onto the street. About a week ago, the local council had strung up big, bright Christmas baubles, from one side of the street to the other, and strung lights in between. The lampposts had been adorned with garlands of green, and fairy lights twinkled in between the plastic foliage, giving the whole street a very festive vibe.

“What do you feel like?” he asked, gesturing to their options.

She didn’t want to talk about food. She wanted to talk about him. He was endlessly fascinating to her, and she couldn’t believe there was so much about him she didn’t know. She stared up at him, her stomach in knots, her whole body in a state of uncertainty.

She wasn’t ready for this.

She wasn’t ready to be attracted to someone else. To be interested in another guy. Ares might have bounced out of their relationship and straight into a serious, ‘til death do us part commitment, but Louisa was too bruised and battered by the whole experience to even think about opening herself up to someone else.

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So, what was she doing here with Noah?

He'd wanted help with his daughter, but it hadn't really been about that, for either of them. Or not solely about that.

Was she really prepared to get back on the horse and start dating again? Already?

The thought turned her blood to ice. It terrified her.

"Louisa?"

She answered quickly, because she didn't want him to know how dark her thoughts had turned. "The Thai restaurant is good," she said, unconsciously slipping back into her Queen in Waiting persona, her voice polished, her posture straight. "Shall we go there?"

A quirk of his brows showed that he noticed a change, but Noah simply put a hand on the small of her back, checked for traffic, then guided her across the street when it was safe to walk.

Noah insisted on ordering and paying, and as Louisa waited, a seat on the footpath became available, so she moved towards it and sat down, staring out at the busy street, losing herself in the spectre of this life. How other people lived. It seemed so foreign to her, after two years in her lovely gilded cage.

Noah returned, carrying two glasses of white wine. "It's going to be a little wait, so I ordered spring rolls and wine," he said, taking the seat opposite. The table was one of

those small round ones, with a modest circumference, meaning there was no way for them to sit opposite without their legs brushing, and Louisa wondered if she'd chosen this table for that reason? There had been others, inside, after all.

"Thank you," she said, crisply.

He lifted his wine glass towards hers. "Thank you for agreeing to tonight."

"Well, don't thank me yet. I'm supposed to be singing for my supper and so far, I've given you precisely zero advice on your daughter."

"We'll get to it. It's just nice to not think about her for a change."

She sipped her wine, rather than placing it on the table. It was crisp with a hint of apple. "Delicious," she said, honestly.

"It's a Clare Valley Riesling. Have you done much travelling around Australia, or did you come straight to Sydney?"

"I came straight here, though I'd love to see more of the country. I needed to get settled first, though."

He nodded, as if that made sense. Usually, it would be the other way around, she suspected, but Louisa had been running away from her old life, and in order to do that, she'd wanted to have a new life ready to step right into. Or maybe she'd known she needed the distraction of a job, to feel useful, so she didn't sink into a place of constant overthinking. Regretting. Worrying that she'd deserted Ares after he'd already lost so many people. Guilt had plagued her for a long time, and in all honesty, had probably contributed to her staying with him for as long as she had. How could she leave a man who'd been orphaned at fifteen? She was incredibly close to her own family; she couldn't imagine how she'd pick up the pieces without her parents.

“Where would you like to go?”

“Everywhere,” she said on a laugh. “I’ve travelled through Europe, extensively, but nowhere else.”

He sipped his own wine, then ran a finger around the base of the glass, contemplatively. “Why Australia?”

Her lips pulled to the side. “It’s far away.”

He laughed unexpectedly. “Sure. Is that it?”

She nodded. “It was my main criteria.”

He reached across the table then, his hand that had been tracing the wine glass now lightly traced circles on her palm. It was such a small, but somehow intimate gesture, that her breath stuck in her throat and her eyes filled with stars.

“Are you running away from something, Louisa?”

He asked the question so directly, so sympathetically, that her insides seemed to jolt, and her heart raced. She bit into her lip, staring across at him, and tried to find words. Was she running away? Yes. But it was more than that. “It’s complicated,” she said, after several beats. “I’m starting fresh.”

“An optimistic spin on running away?” he noticed.

“I guess so.”

He reached for her fingers properly then, lacing them together, and suddenly Louisa was fourteen and holding hands with her first boyfriend, her body all tingly and flush

with warmth and a kind of awareness she had no idea how to process.

“Are you okay?” The question caught her by surprise. He wasn’t asking about right now, he was asking, in general.



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She blinked at him, amazed by how he seemed to see inside of her and understand. She'd been here a month and worked closely with people like Donovan and nobody had seen beneath the veneer she presented at work. Not even Stuart Conroy, who knew what she'd left behind in Moricosia.

But somehow Noah saw.

"I'm okay," she said, and she smiled because, with Noah, she felt better than okay. She actually felt kind of great.

He let go of her hand and just like when he'd saved her from the scooter kid, she felt a strange emptiness afterwards. She put her hand under the table, and rubbed her thigh, to try to get rid of the tingling in her fingertips.

"So, you were telling me how a handsome young man like you ends up with a fifteen-year-old," she said, her voice shaking only the slightest amount.

He grimaced, sipped his drink, then replaced it slowly, staring at the condensation before flicking his glance up to Louisa. "It wasn't planned," he said, simply, and then dragged a hand through his hair. "I was twenty, Amy was twenty-three, and at the height of her career."

Louisa nodded sympathetically, leaning forward a little.

"She fell pregnant, we got married, and then, there was Tay."

Louisa's smile was soft because his words were filled with love at the end of the

sentence.

“So, you’re only a little bit old,” she teased.

“Thirty-five?” He pretended offence and she hid a smile behind her wine glass.

“Don’t worry. Some things get better with age, and I think you might be one of them.”

He let out a low whistle. “You’re making me feel bad for?—,”

“For?”

His eyes met hers with a startling intensity. “Some of my thoughts.”

“Your—Oh,” Heat flushed her cheeks as his meaning dawned on her. She shook her head a little, her lips parting. “I think...your thoughts and my thoughts would probably have a really good time together, if we let them.”

Her skin was slick with heat. Her body pumped with awareness. The world tipped sideways.

“I think you’re probably right.”

And he lifted his wine glass towards hers in another salutation, but this time, it also held a silent, sensual promise. Louisa met it without hesitation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

HE READ THE TEXT FROM his housekeeper Kristen as Louisa unlocked the front door.

All good here. She came out for dinner, made some polite conversation, then went to her room. I just checked; she's asleep.

And he exhaled because in the back of his mind, he'd had a sense of unease that even the beautiful Louisa couldn't completely erase. Oh, she did a damned good job of distracting him, but there was still a small percentage of his brain left that could think about his daughter, and how much he was screwing everything up, and hating Amy, even when he knew it wasn't her fault, for leaving him holding the baby.

"Okay," Louisa turned to face him, and now he knew that Taylor was asleep, his night was suddenly his own again. He stepped into her apartment, and whether from the sheer force of relief or because he'd been wanting to do this all night, he put an arm behind her and drew her back against his body, just like he had on the street, only this time, he kissed her.

He kissed her.

Because she'd been there and he'd wanted to, because the force of their chemistry had been turning them both into fireflies all evening.

He was about to pull away, but her lips were so soft, and her mouth so warm, and then she moaned and leaned harder against him, so her breasts were crushed to his chest and her hips shifted a little, and his whole mind went bright white and then utterly blank, so only his body was in control. He vaguely remembered a narrow console table being behind them, and he reached back and placed the bag of food there, so both his hands were free to hold her against him. She was all soft and warm and the flimsy cotton of her shirt was hardly anything, so he could feel her completely even through those clothes.

It was her lips though that were haunting him, kissing him back with just the same passion and need he felt, almost devouring him, and it was the easiest thing in the

world to lift her and wrap her legs around his waist as he stalked deeper into her apartment and looked around for somewhere that they could keep doing this.

“My bedroom—,” she said, pointing down the hallway.

His brain briefly flickered to life. “You’re sure?”

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She pulled away to meet his eyes, uncertainty in her depths. Hell, he hadn't meant to do anything more than kiss her. Noah hadn't been with anyone since Amy. And his marriage with Amy had broken down a long time before he'd left her. He hated to think how many years it had been since he'd slept with a woman.

Did he even know how to anymore?

"I—," she blinked, and looked away. "You're not sure," she intimated, and the mood totally died, because he'd offended her. He could see it in her face.

"I'm sure," he said quickly, "if you are."

"No, it's—you don't have to say that?—,"

He groaned. "This is not—I just haven't—," honesty was his only path. "It's been a long time. Years. I suspect I'll be a very disappointing experience, and I would actually, really like to not disappoint you."

"Oh." Her eyes widened and then she smiled, a slow, seductive smile that reached inside of him and reminded him that he was Noah Fox, and he could do anything he damn well wanted. "I think you'll be just fine. I believe it's a little like riding a bike..."

He laughed at her analogy, and walked, without a hint of doubt, toward her bedroom door.

Louisa had died and gone to heaven. Several times. His touch was incendiary.

Delightful. Perfect. He stripped her clothes slowly, and in a way that made her want to scream, but her patience was rewarded because afterwards, he delighted in exploring her body inch by inch by inch. With his fingers and his mouth, tasting, teasing, committing to memory.

His mouth worshipped her breasts, her nipples, the sensitive flesh at the base of her neck, behind her ear lobes, and then, between her legs, at the apex of her thighs, with his mouth, and his fingers, and again with his mouth, until she was incandescent and crying his name out with no regard for who heard her. She wasn't even aware how loudly she was screaming, only that two syllables kept tearing themselves from her lungs: Noooo-Ahhhhhhh.

But it was when he parted her thighs with his knee and pressed the head of his sheathed arousal there, that she whimpered with desperate, anxious longing. "If you don't takeme, I think I might die," she said, digging her nails into his shoulder.

And whatever lack of confidence she'd detected in the hallway had evaporated completely. Then again, giving her multiple orgasms before the main event would probably do that to a guy.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" he teased, and bracing himself on either side of her head, he stared into her eyes as he pushed into her, and when he was buried deep, so deep she could feel all parts of him and her muscles were straining to accommodate him, he kissed her, long and slow, and just stayed like that, so she had time to get used to him, and him to her.

And then, he moved and the boundaries of her world seemed to explode, like thunderbolts had struck them and shrapnel was flying everywhere. Because she'd come before, several times, but it was nothing to this. The feeling of his hair-roughened chest against her naked breasts, his body completely dominating hers, his mastery, his strength, his skill.

She cried his name again, those same two syllables rent with passion and need, and he moved as though they were in a silent, tribal dance. Not for their first time, but for their millionth, as though they were ancient, reincarnated partners, who knew exactly how to please one another, how to answer the questions the other posed.

She arched her back; he cursed, and right as a wave of heat and light carried her over the edge, he exploded with her, his body wracked with pleasure, his cry low and guttural, and pulling at something in her gut. He collapsed on top of her, his weight perfect, and she stroked his back, not wanting to relinquish this moment, and definitely not wanting to think about what would come next.

Because she'd just slept with a man she met that day, who happened to be an incredibly important client. A man she'd be working with, closely, for at least the next six weeks. And in her rear vision mirror, her personal life was a bit of a disaster. Not to mention his own messy personal life.

Those were thoughts for another time, though. Here, in the darkness of her bedroom, with Noah Fox on top of her, she didn't care about anything beyond this feeling.

"Hungry?" He propped up onto one hand, his features barely visible in the darkness of her room.

She stroked his back slowly, smiling. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I just feel...perfect."

His laugh was low and gruff. "You do feel perfect," he repeated, moving his hips a little.

She moved her hand to his chest, tracing a line between his pectoral muscles, before running it back upwards again. “So how long has it been for you?” Curiosity fired inside of her.

“Hmmm,” he made a contemplative noise. “Way too long.”

She flicked him with her forefinger. “That’s not an answer.”

“Honestly, I don’t remember. Years. At least a year before Amy and I split officially, and I’ve been here for eighteen months. So…”

She returned to stroking his back. “Here? From where?”

“We were living in the States. LA.”

“I didn’t know that.”



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“Really? I thought everyone knew that,” he said, then laughed a little awkwardly. “My marriage break up was a source of interest for people in Australia. You know, our family name is kind of...”

“I get it. You’re famous.” And ice crept up her spine because she’d just left one high-profile relationship and definitely didn’t want to find herself in the middle of another.

“No, not at all. My family is famous, and at certain times, that fame bleeds into our individual lives. Plus, Amy has a high profile, so...”

“Yeah, I get it.” She bit into her lip, worrying it between her teeth. “Does it bother you?”

“Yes,” he answered, instantly. “I hate it. I hate that kind of attention. I hate speculation and gossip, and I particularly hate the prospect of my daughter being caught up in it.”

He moved away then, rolling onto his back, in one of the cruelest deprivations Louisa had ever felt.

He stepped up from the bed and scooped up his clothes. “Where’s your bathroom?”

She pointed through the open doorway. “Just across the hall.”

He took a step towards it then returned to the bed and bent over, kissing her forehead. “Thanks, Louisa. That was really special.”

Her heart soared and she found she couldn't quite make her voice box work to say anything in response. Instead, she waited until he'd left the room then stood, her body heavy with relaxation and pleasure, so it was an effort just to get dressed again. She eschewed the clothes that were on the floor and instead pulled on some underpants and a loose cotton maxi dress. In the kitchen, she removed bowls and cutlery, and a bottle of wine from the fridge, from which she poured two glasses.

Noah came through with the dinner and a rueful expression. "It probably needs to be reheated."

"And here you thought you'd disappoint me," she teased. "There was nothing fast, or disappointing, about that," she clarified.

He shrugged, the rueful expression deepening. "I have been thinking about you all day. I was worried one touch would set me off."

"Ah, what big stamina you have," she did her best impression of an X-Rated Little Red Riding Hood. "What have we got?"

He passed the bag over and she removed plastic containers one after the other, placing them on the counter. She was pleased to realize he'd ordered some of her favourites, like pad thai and green curry.

"Happy for me to serve up?"

"Sure," he nodded. "I'll have whatever."

She distributed the food into two bowls, then microwaved them one at a time. She wasn't wearing a bra, and each movement she made caused her dress to brush against her nipples, which, thanks to Noah, were incredibly sensitive.

“Okay,” she said, sliding the heated meal across the counter to him. Her heart jolted when their eyes met, and she remembered how distractingly handsome he was. He had a cleft in his chin that she kept wanting to divot her thumb into. In fact, his whole face looked as though it had been lovingly hand-crafted by a very skilled sculptor.

Another art analogy? She was really losing herself here.

“Okay?”

“Let’s talk about your daughter.”

He pulled a face. “And ruin a perfectly lovely evening?”

Pleasure sparked inside of her, but so did a hint of responsibility. “You said you wanted help. I’m here if that’s still the case.”

He dragged a hand through his hair. “God knows I need it.”

“So?”

He studied her carefully. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

She blinked with surprise. She hadn’t really thought that far ahead, only she knew that this was a little more complicated than she’d appreciated.

“I...why?”

He laughed. “So I can see you again? Let’s leave the Taylor conversation until then. Partly because I don’t want to ruin tonight, and partly because at the moment, I think I might say some things about her that I’d regret in the light of day.”

“You’re annoyed.”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “We can talk tomorrow night.”

But her expression must have given her away because he leaned forward and asked, “What is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re thinking something serious.”

She arched a brow. “You know me that well, huh?”

“You have a very readable face.”

“I’ve never been told that before.” If anything, it was the opposite. She’d become exceptional at hiding her innermost thoughts. She’d had to. “I just think we should be honest with each other, from the outset of this,” she said, after a beat.

“Sure,” he nodded, but slowly, like he didn’t really understand where she was going but was willing to humour her.

“I just broke up with someone,” she said, in a bit of a rush. “Well, three months ago, actually, but we were together a couple of years, and it was pretty serious, and the breakup was...the whole situation was...it was a mess,” she admitted. Then, wincing,

“I was a mess.”

“So, you ran away to Australia,” he said, reaching for her hand again and squeezing it.

She nodded. “And planned to lick my wounds all on my lonesome. I definitely wasn’t looking for a relationship. I’m still not,” she hastened to add.

“I get it.” He moved his hand to his fork and speared some noodles, all without taking his eyes off her for more than a second. “I’m in a similar situation. I’ve got a daughter who takes pretty much all of my focus when I’m not at work. I don’t have the headspace for anything else.”

Louisa wondered at the sinking feeling in her stomach.

“With that being said,” he continued thoughtfully, “I like spending time with you. I don’t really think we have to complicate it more than that. We can just be two people who are hanging out, can’t we?”

He made it sound like the easiest thing in the world, and she realized it was exactly what she needed. Not to have a big deep-and-meaningful chat about her broken heart, not to talk about her PTSD from years of being hounded by the media. Just to exist and spend time with someone nice and kind.

“Yeah,” she said, and she smiled at him, as a weight seemed to lift off her shoulders. “And at work?”

“We work,” he shrugged, as though it didn’t really matter. “Is sleeping with me going to affect your performance on the campaign?”

She pulled a face. “No.”

“Great. And you don’t technically work for me—you’re an outside contractor—so there’s no HR issue. I have no power to fire you or make your life difficult. Not that I would, anyway.”

“I know that.”

“So this isn’t a “me too” situation.”

She shook her head.

“Great. Any other problems?”

She sucked in a breath and then expelled it slowly. “In the spirit of honesty,” she said, knowing this was important, even when they’d agreed to keep things light. “My last relationship was...somewhat high profile.”

He paused, halfway between lifting his fork to his mouth. “Oh?”

She nodded. “And so far, I’ve been left to my own devices, but when my ex announces his engagement, which will be any day now, I fully expect that to change.” Her eyes dropped to the counter between them. “I just didn’t want you to be blindsided by that.”

“Your ex—who you broke up with three months ago—is engaged to someone else?”

Heat flushed her cheeks. “I know how that sounds, but I’m happy for them, honestly. I’m happy for him.”

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Noah let out a low whistle. “Why don’t you start at the top, so I understand this a little better?”

She sipped her wine. Fair enough, but she had no intention of getting into all the nitty gritty details. A brief overview would suffice.

“Ares and I—that would be King Ares Christou Diamantis of Moricosia—were dating, and everything was fine in the beginning. I suppose it was even a little exciting. And definitely flattering. We were a good couple, good friends, well-matched in lots of ways.”

“You’re talking about the King of Moricosia,” he said, brows lifting towards his hairline. “That’s your ex?”

She nodded. “He’s really a great guy,” she said as if she needed to defend Ares. “I adore him, I really do.”

Noah’s brows knit together. “So why did you dump him?”

“That’s complicated. But basically, I couldn’t live like that,” she shook her head. “We were dating for two years, this summer. There was a heap of speculation that we would get engaged and married this year, and it sort of reached a fever pitch, so that I couldn’t go anywhere outside the palace walls without being mobbed. By people, photographers, you name it, I was followed. My car was chased when I drove anywhere, which was genuinely scary.”

“You didn’t get engaged?”

“No, I think Ares probably knew that it wasn’t right, as well. We really did love each other, but more as friends. It might have been enough, in a way, if it weren’t for the whole living your life in the public eye thing.”

He let out a low whistle. “That’s not what I expected you to say, at all.”

She winced. “I’m sorry.”

He frowned. “Why are you apologizing.”

“I probably should have told you before,” she gestured towards the bedroom.

“Why? It doesn’t change anything.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Louisa, of course not. I mean, I understand you better, but if I’d known you had dated King Ares six hours ago, I still wouldn’t have been able to get you out of my mind.”

“Okay,” she said with a breath of relief. “But you have a daughter, and I don’t want to complicate your situation, you know? Plus, as you pointed out, you have your own high-profile scenario, which I would dearly love not to get mixed up in. So, this whole thing should probably happen behind closed doors. If anything else happens, I mean.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to suggest having sex with you on the street,” he said, grinning lopsidedly.

“I meant dinners,” she rolled her eyes. “Are you saying I’m just sex to you?” She demanded with mock hauteur, the effect ruined by a twitching in one side of her



mouth.

“Totally. In fact, now we’ve done that, I’ve been trying to work out how quickly I can leave.”

She grabbed her fork and threatened to slingshot some food at him, so he held his hands up in mock surrender.

“We’ll keep it private,” he agreed. “There’s no need to complicate this. Taylor’s my priority, and you know that from the outset. And you’re clearly not in the headspace for mess, so it’s easy. We’re just two people who are hanging out. Cool?”

“Cool,” she repeated, unable to stop smiling.

“What?”

“Aren’t you a little old to be using words like ‘cool’?”

Now it was his turn to grab for a fork and attempt to slingshot it at her, but she jumped out of the way at the last moment, dashing to the side. The side, closer to Noah, who stood quickly and caught her around the waist. Rather than flinging food, he tickled her hip instead and she squealed. How did he know that was her weakness? It was the one spot on her body guaranteed to make her lose her mind.

“Stop, stop,” she said through tears of laughter. “You win!”

He stopped then, staring down at her with intensity. “What do I win, Miss Petrakis?”

She was breathless. Not from laughing so much she cried, but from how close he was standing. “Anything you want, Mr Fox.”

“Well, in that case...” and he lifted her up once more, carrying her back to the bedroom, and the promise of more pleasure and heaven than Louisa almost knew what to do with. Almost...

### CHAPTER SIX

HE'D TOLD HER THAT having sex wouldn't change anything at work, but that had clearly been a fool's hope. Because sitting at the boardroom table as Louisa went through her team's vision—a team she'd assembled incredibly quickly, and well—he couldn't help but find it difficult to focus.

He was grateful Rose was sitting to his left. Ostensibly, she was there to take minutes, but she'd been with him a long time and was both relied upon and confident enough to pick up his evident slack.

“When can you get this moving?” she asked. It was something he obviously should have wanted to know. He looked at Louisa and her brow quirked in silent enquiry, whilst her boss fielded the question. He felt Louisa's teasing, and his temperature rose. So did his anticipation.

It was only lunchtime, though. There was a full afternoon to get through, plus his time with Taylor. She had netball training, and he made a point of going to watch, even though, at fifteen, she told him that was embarrassing. Only he'd had the benefit of parents who'd been involved in his life; he wasn't going to drop the ball with her.

Except, he had dropped the ball. When they were in LA, he'd done his best, but he'd presumed, for a long time, that Amy was on top of this stuff. He'd focused on his work, partly to escape his unhappy marriage. And in the process, he'd escaped his daughter and let her down.

Well, never again.

But after netball, and Taylor's dinner, he would go straight back to Louisa's, and he almost couldn't wait.

"Noah?" Stuart Conroy asked, so he cursed inwardly.

"Yeah?"

"Sound good?"

He looked at Louisa who gave a very subtle nod. "Sure. Sounds cool," he said, unable to resist seeing the effect it had on her.

She rolled her eyes almost imperceptibly, then took her seat to Stuart's left.

"Great. The digital assets are already being prepared by our in-house team, and we've booked the New Year's filming for later this week?—,"

"No felons, this time around?" he couldn't resist asking.

"I'm personally overseeing casting," Louisa interjected. "Though we are getting a couple of influencers on board, however, they've been thoroughly vetted."

Her confidence, and thoroughness, were incredibly hot.

He leaned back in his chair as the meeting continued, aware that Rose would take such detailed notes he could review them later. Because his mind was focused on something else.

On imagining Louisa as Queen of Moricosia.

She'd dated the King for years, and it sounded as though an engagement had been in

the offing. He couldn't say why that hadn't happened, but he could easily imagine Louisa in that role. She was so dignified and classy, so beautiful and kind. She was exactly the kind of woman any man would be proud to be with. But a King? That was a whole other level, and Noah imagined that Ares had known he would need a Queen with all the traits Louisa possessed in abundance.

Was that why they'd started dating? Had it been more about her suitability to take her place at his side, rather than her as a person? She'd said they loved one another as friends, but she'd also said she might have married him, had it not been for the whole fishbowl experience of being with someone so famous.

Either way, it was easy to imagine her married to King Ares, easy to imagine that side of her, and he acknowledged, with a small hint of concern, that he didn't like it.

Because he'd seen another side of her.

While she was all those things—contained, confident, carefully spoken, polite—she was also funny and silly, and he loved those parts of her. He liked the way she teased him, the way she challenged him, the way she spoke to him so directly. He imagined how much of her life she would have had to re-shape if she had married the King, and it left him with an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

He was glad she'd escaped that.

Glad she'd run away to Australia.

And gladder still that she'd run right into his arms. It was easy and casual, but that didn't mean they couldn't throw themselves fully into the business of pleasing, and being pleased by, one another.

“Do you have a moment?” Noah asked, as the others filed from the room, the question

directed at Louisa.

Louisa's eyes met his and her cheeks flushed pink. Her discomfort was adorable.

“I—,”

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“Do you need me, too?” Stuart Conroy asked from the door, which he’d been just about to walk through.

“Louisa should be able to handle this,” Noah responded, with a curt shake of his head, dismissing the older advertising executive.

“Do you need something, Mr Fox?” she purred, leaving him in little doubt that the last hour had played havoc with her senses just as much as it had his.

He prowled towards his closed office door and clicked the lock in place. “Whatever could you mean?”

“Well,” she said, walking towards him, the glint in her eyes unmistakable. “You see, part of my job is client management,” she said, her fingers reaching for his belt, without moving her eyes from his face. “And I wasn’t sure you were absolutely as happy as you could have been in that meeting.”

Holy shit.

This was not going where he’d expected.

Not even a little bit. He’d meant to flirt with her, maybe kiss her. But this was...next level.

She dropped his belt to the floor and then took a step backward. “So, if you’d like to take your seat, maybe we can see what I can do to improve things for you.”

“Louisa.” Was that his voice? It was so hoarse. Thick with desire. More desire than he’d ever felt. He was about to come, then and there. “I thought we agreed to keep work and this separate.”

Her lips flickered with amusement. Light-hearted amusement, just as they’d promised each other.

“Play along, Mr Fox. A little fun never killed anyone...”

She took his hand and tugged on it, walking ahead of him to the boardroom table and waiting for him to sit down. He hesitated for the briefest moment then returned to his seat.

He swore as she undid his pants, and then again as she freed his rock-hard arousal from his boxers. But when she knelt between his legs and took him deep in her mouth, all the way to the back of her throat, her name was the only word in his mind, and the only word he said, for several minutes.

In those moments of blazing euphoria, her name was both a lifeline and a swan song; her name was everything.

From the sublime, Noah thought, to the most definitely not sublime.

That scene in his office, which had most definitely not been PG, had replayed in his mind about a hundred times throughout the afternoon, right up until the moment he’d crashed headlong into the reality of his life and wanted to do a little running away of his own.

Taylor, never really much fun to be around at the moment, was in an even worse mood than usual. She slammed the door after climbing into his car, glared instead of saying hello, and finally grunted, as they drove down the driveway, “You’re late. I



could have just gotten an Uber.”

He ground his teeth. “I am two minutes late.”

“Yeah, well, at least I can track Ubers.”

“You can track me, too,” he pointed out. He’d read in one of the copious parenting books he’d devoured that if you wanted to be able to trace your child’s phones, you should offer a reciprocal right. He wasn’t sure if he agreed with that. Being a parent was different to being a child. He paid the bills, so surely he had some increased rights?

But he didn’t particularly care if she wanted to know where he was and what he was doing, so he’d left it.

“I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

He let the insult slide. “How was your day?”

She made a grunting noise.

“School good?”

She looked out the window.

“What homework do you have tonight?”

“Why? Are you going to help me with it?”

He compressed his lips. Her resentment of him had gone on long enough. “Do you need help?”

She grunted.

“Listen, Tay,” he said, gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles glowed white, trying to get a grip on his temper. Don’t react when you’re angry, he reminded himself. It was a cardinal rule. Just let it go.

“What?”

“I get that you’re pissed with me?—,”

She snorted.

“But I would like to know how long I can expect this to last?”

“Oh, gee, I don’t know. How’s forever?”

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Tell her about Amy. Tell her about the booze. The pills. Tell her how unsafe it had been for her.

And wreck her relationship with her mother?

No way.

Even when he was furious, he wouldn’t go down that path.

“Okay, fine,” he shrugged, as though he didn’t care. “We’ll play it your way.”

She whipped her head around to his, perhaps because she'd expected to argue, and then crossed her arms abruptly over her chest. "Whatever."

He pulled up at the netball courts and the car had barely slowed to a stop when she pushed open her door.

"Jesus, Taylor. Can you wait just a second?"

She glared at him again and then stalked away, but he could have sworn he saw a tear running down her cheek as she turned the corner.

His heart sunk and he felt, in this one aspect of his life, like an utter and complete failure.

"She hates me." His voice was blanked of emotion with apparent care, but his eyes showed the depths of his pain. "I don't mean that like she's going through a phase. She actively hates me. She seethes with rage. And I keep looking at her, and trying to work out where my little girl went? When did this happen? And why can't I fix it?"

"Start at the beginning," she said, reusing his turn of phrase from the night before. Louisa sat cross-legged on the floor, across from Noah, in the comfort of her lounge room. The day had been warm, and even though the sun had gone down more than an hour earlier, it was still warm in her apartment, but not overbearingly so.

He curled his hands around the mug of coffee and cradled it thoughtfully before taking a sip.

"She was the most beautiful kid," he said with a shake of his head. "Beautiful despite her home life," he added with a look of shame. "Amy and I were not that happy, most of the time. We fought in front of her. I mean, Amy had a temper, but I didn't de-escalate it like I should have. I was angry. I felt trapped if I'm honest."

Louisa's brows shot up. She remembered saying exactly that to Ares, though she'd been referring to the paparazzi, and the features of his royal life. But the sentiment had been similar, so too her desperation.

"I had never planned to have children at that age, nor to get married, but one thing followed the other, and there we were. I tried to make the best of it, but Amy and I were never really well-suited. It should have just been a stupid summer romance. A fling, at best."

She nodded sympathetically, encouraging him silently to continue.

"I don't know when things went off the rails for her." He drank his coffee. "She always liked to party. We both did, at that age. But Taylor sobered me up. I grew up. Suddenly, we had this perfect, fragile baby, and I would have done anything for her. Given up anything."

"But Amy didn't?"

He frowned. "I thought she just liked to party, but I think she's probably always been an addict. Her behaviour got more and more reckless. Stupid. She made a lot of dumb mistakes."

Louisa leaned forward unconsciously.

"She doted on Tay, though. That was all that mattered. I knew we weren't that happy, as a couple, but so long as we both loved Tay, I thought it would be okay. Honestly, I don't know how we made it work for as long as we did."

Noah placed his coffee cup on the tray between them.

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“Anyway, a couple of years ago, I came home late, and the house was filled with smoke. Amy was passed out. Drunk. High. Both. Taylor was up in her room, thank God. She was fine. But if I’d been an hour later, I can’t even imagine what would have happened.”

Louisa gasped.

“So, I finally left her and brought Taylor with me.”

“That’s when you moved here?”

“No. First I tried to live in LA, around the corner from her. I still wanted her to be a part of Taylor’s life. I made her rehab a part of our custody deal, but she just couldn’t stick at it.”

Sympathy stirred inside Louisa. “I did some work with a rehab charity in Moricosia. Alcoholism is such an awful disease.”

“Yes,” his eyes sparked to hers. “And it tore Amy apart. But it was starting to get to Taylor, too. Amy drove her to my place one day and I swear she was drunk. She denied it, and I didn’t want to make a scene in front of Tay, but I could just tell. God. What a mess.”

“It sounds like you tried everything you could to help her.”

“I’m still trying. I want her to be in Taylor’s life. I have no interest in ruining their relationship. But I need to know my daughter’s safe. And I don’t just mean

physically.”

Louisa waited for him to keep going.

“Amy’s online, posting the most ridiculous stuff. Dressing inappropriately, making out with random guys, clearly hammered. Taylor wants social media desperately, and her mother’s let her go on Instagram, despite me telling her again and again it’s not a good idea. I had to delete the app off Tay’s phone, so yet again, I’m the bad guy. I just want to shield her from this.”

Louisa sipped her drink again. “Why?” She asked after she’d made sure she was trying to see it from every angle.

“Because it’s her mother.”

“Yes, but this is who Amy is. She’s an addict. That’s going to be a lifelong struggle. Do you really think it’s right to hide that from Taylor?”

His brow furrowed. “You think I made the wrong choice?”

She moved closer, putting her hand on his. “I think you made the loving choice, but I presume Taylor’s not an idiot. She must have seen things, noticed things, that made her wonder. So why not be open with her? You can keep it age-appropriate and respectful. You can tell her you’re trying to help Amy get better, but that until Amy is better, she’s not a safe person for Taylor to be with.”

“I just don’t want either of them to accuse me of trying to wreck their bond or whatever.”

“You’re not doing that, Amy’s alcoholism is. You’re trying to keep your daughter safe and get Amy the help she needs. The rest is out of your hands.”

He sighed. “You might have a different perspective on these things than my adolescent daughter.”

“Undoubtedly,” she said with a half-smile. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t explain it to her.”

He stared at her intently.

“She might say that she hates you, she might rail against you, but she’ll still be listening. She’ll still hear your words, and eventually, she’ll understand.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff. Is this all because of your sister?”

“She was a handful, for sure. But I’m also close to Ares’s siblings—he has three—and so I’ve kind of seen everything.”

He scanned her face in a way that made her blood simmer. “Who’s he marrying?”

It was not a question she was prepared for. “Oh.” She looked down quickly, to gather her thoughts, before she felt able to meet his eyes again. “Someone he met through a friend. Someone who was doing some work for him, actually,” she couldn’t help adding with a wry smile.

“Tsk, ts. A workplace romance. What a silly idea.”

“Terrible,” Louisa agreed, moving closer so she could sit beside him, instead of opposite. She liked being close. She liked feeling his warmth, having him within easy touching distance.

“You’re not jealous?”

She pulled a face. “I’m grateful,” she responded. “I felt so much guilt for leaving him as I did. If the speculation was bad for me, it must have been dreadful for him. But I had to get away. It wasn’t an option. I know I let him down, in some ways. So, I was glad when he told me he’d met someone else. Especially glad because when I looked her up online, she looks to be a really great person.”



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“Who is she?”

“Part of the Santoro family, sort of obliquely.”

“No kidding? I’ve worked with them before.”

Her eyes widened. “You have?”

“Yeah, they built our Dubai hotel.”

Her eyes swept shut. “Well, that’s weird.”

“Is it? Why?”

She frowned. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s more just...random.”

He lifted a shoulder. “I’ve never met her, though.”

“She’s way too young for you,” Louisa teased, relieved to move the conversation to lighter ground.

He nudged her with his shoulder. “The same could be said for you.”

“Hey, I’m twenty-six,” she replied. “Perfectly old enough to have a casual thing with.”

“I’m glad you think so. Because I’m becoming kind of attached to this casual thing.”

“Our two-night stand?” she suggested, batting her lashes.

“You say that like I’m not going to be back here tomorrow night.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Aren’t you being just a little presumptuous?”

He moved forward then, kissing her thoroughly and desperately. “Would you rather I not come?”

“On the contrary...I want you to come,” she said, sliding her hand down his pants until she connected with his arousal. “Tonight, tomorrow night, and if you’re a very good boy, even the night after that.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

EIGHT NIGHTS LATER, HE COULD only conclude that he’d become addicted to making up for lost time. Having spent the bulk of his adult life with Amy, who he now realized he had pretty lackluster chemistry with, he hadn’t actually realized any woman could drive him so completely crazy.

Louisa was every single one of his teen fantasies come to life. And in a little over a week, she had quite literally become the air he breathed, almost all the time.

She was there, in the office, from first thing in the morning until the evening. She was there in her power suits and heels, and bright red lips, shiny dark hair, distractingly manicured nails, with her bright ideas and very sharp wit, making him want to abandon any plans to promote his Sydney hotel and instead take her away from all this for a proper uninterrupted week together.

He was a father first and foremost, and he never, ever wished that he wasn’t. But there had been many times, in the intervening week, in which he’d resented Amy for

not being more help.

There was Kristen, and he knew he could ask his housekeeper to do just about anything. But looking after a surly, rule-breaking, ungrateful teenager was definitely not something he could throw at her for days on end. Nights were fine, particularly as he'd started staying home later and later, waiting until Taylor was more or less settled for the night before driving across town to Louisa's.

He missed having dinner with Louisa; he'd liked that. But he also recognized the practical constraints of what they were doing.

So, they made the most of the few hours they had together, and then he'd sneak out, once she was asleep, and drive back home. And start the clock counting on when he'd be able to be alone with her again.

The office was its own particular form of torture, particularly because Louisa seemed to delight in tormenting him. In meetings, she would purse her lips and hold his eye contact long enough that he could only imagine the way her mouth had looked wrapped around his length, just as she'd promised that first day in his boardroom when she'd done just that. Or she'd stand so close that his hands would itch to reach out and brush up her leg or squeeze her bottom, or brush her hair from her face, or damn well kiss that pout from her mouth.

Many times, he imagined what the advertising team would do if he acted out one such fantasy.

He owned the company. They were Fox hotels. What would they do? To him, nothing. But to Louisa?

And what were the chances that someone eager to make a quick buck wouldn't sell the story? He wasn't a celebrity in the same class as her ex, but locally there was still

interest in their billion-dollar family when it came to relationships.

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So, he kept his hands firmly clasped on the desk when she was nearby and tried his hardest not to look at her unless it was absolutely necessary.

In the privacy of her home, it was Noah's turn to torment Louisa. There, she was his prisoner, his willing supplicant, and he could drive her wild with a single touch. Which he did, again and again, his body's mastery over hers unrivaled. He hoped.

But by the eighth day, he knew that he was becoming addicted to this.

They'd said they'd keep it light, and it was definitely that, but at the same time, he couldn't imagine a time when he'd want to walk away from her.

So, what did that mean?

He had a teenager at home. He couldn't exactly start dating someone seriously. Could he?

Just the thought of it made his pulse crank up.

Why couldn't he? Lots of people did it. It wasn't as though he and Amy had only recently split. Their marriage had been over for a long time. And it wasn't like Taylor could be any angrier with him. So, what exactly did he have to lose?

"You can't be serious?" Louisa said when he broached the subject with her. "You want me to meet Taylor?"

"Why not?"

Panic showed on her features. “Because I—we’re—we said?—,”

“I know.” And it had only been a week. Uncharacteristic doubts spread through him. “And I know it’s only been a week. But I like you, Louisa. I want to see where this goes, without constraints.”

“We don’t have constraints,” she said quickly.

“Of course we do. You want to avoid being seen with me in public, and I’ve been trying to keep you quarantined from my actual life. But I don’t want to just be this anymore,” he gestured to the bed. “I want to have dinner with you. Go for walks with you. I want to date you.”

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth in that distracting way she had, but this time, he could tell it was to bite back a smile. She was happy? This wasn’t a disaster?

“What do you think?” he asked quickly.

“I think I’m scared,” she responded, with the kind of honesty he adored in her.

“What of?”

“Well, you have a kid, for one thing. And I feel like my life is a bit of a mess right now. I mean, they haven’t announced their engagement but as soon as they do, it’s going to be all over the world, and people are going to start looking to see me cry, writing some whole heartbreak narrative around the fact I’m down here in Australia. It’s going to be bedlam, and the last thing I want to do is drag you into that. Or Taylor.”

“Okay, fair enough. I appreciate your consideration, though if it weren’t for Taylor, I’d say that’s all the more reason to prove to the world that you’re doing just fine,

too.”

Her eyes widened and she tilted her head in concession to that fact. “Perhaps.”

“But Taylor is very much a part of my life, and any decision I make has to put her front and centre. Even when she drives me absolutely crazy.”

“You’re a great dad,” she said softly, with something like pride. “I really like that about you.”

“I rarely feel like it.”

“I think that’s the hallmark of a good parent.”

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug. “I had a good example.”

“I did, too.”

“You’re close to your parents?”

She nodded.

“How do they feel about your whole royal break up and Australia move?”

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“Fine about both,” she said. “They were always quick to make sure that dating Ares was what I wanted. I know a lot of parents might aspire to that kind of thing for their kids, but mine didn’t. We’re—,” her cheeks flushed pink.

“Go on,” he said, loving that she was embarrassed, but also hating it at the same time, because he didn’t want her to censor herself at all.

“Well, we’re from this old, aristocratic family. Very well known in Moricosia. So, while Ares is the King, it’s not like...”

“It’s not like you’re a nobody.”

“Right. It wasn’t some Cinderella story,” she said. “They have money, connections, a small palace on the water,” she added for good measure.

He laughed. “Right, I get the picture.”

“So, with Ares, they really just wanted to know I was happy. And I think they probably realized, sooner than I did, that I wasn’t.”

He reached out and cupped her hand. “I hate the thought of that.”

“It wasn’t Ares,” she added, and her quickness to defend the other man stoked something inside of Noah. Even though she’d told him it hadn’t been a wild love story, even though King Ares was now engaged to someone else. She’d been with him for years, and clearly still thought very highly of him.



Noah was jealous.

It hit him like a blade, right in the middle of his chest. For perhaps the first time in his life, he actually envied someone. Another man. For Ares had held a special place in Louisa's life and continued to do so.

Noah swallowed, trying to erase the useless emotion.

“He really is a great guy. But there was so much formality in everything we did and the constant sense of being groomed for a future role I wasn't even sure I wanted. It started as a relationship and turned into a burden that just got heavier and heavier by the day.”

He leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers.

“The running away part was their idea. They knew the media wouldn't give me a moment's peace if I stayed, and Stuart Conroy is one of Dad's oldest friends. He pulled some strings, and the next minute, I was on a flight over here.”

“All's well that ends well?”

“We'll see. I expect the press release to be made anytime.”

“He'll give you a heads up, right?”

“Oh, absolutely. I'll have to make a statement,” she said, frowning. “Though I imagine someone from the royal protocol team will draft it for me.”

“Why not draft it yourself?”

“Because they'll know exactly what to say.”

It was some small insight into how life had been for Louisa in the palace, and why she'd run from it. The Louisa he'd come to know would never let someone else speak for her.

"It's hard to explain," she said, as if reading his mind. "The royal family is kind of a whole separate beast. Everything they do is an exercise in PR."

"But Ares is about to announce his engagement to a woman he just met, a woman who's not from Moricosia, who's not aristocratic, and only a few months after you left the country. How is that good PR?"

"Because there's a whole big love story behind it," she said, with a wave of her hand, as though it made sense. "And there's nothing people love more than a happy ending, especially for Ares, after what he went through."

Noah shrugged. "I think people would want that for you too."

"Yep, but first they'll want to see me cry, believe me."

"I do believe you," he said, having his own experience with tabloids. "I just wish you were wrong."

"You're sure this is okay?"

"Taylor's at a friend's house," he said, driving his car into a below ground parking garage. "Today was the last day of the term, so they're celebrating."

“A party?”

“No, three girls at the house of one of her friends whose parents I trust implicitly. There’ll be pizza, probably R-rated scary movies, and way too much lemonade. Normal teen stuff. And for once, she can’t tell me I’m ruining her life because I wouldn’t let her go.”

“Okay, then.” Excitement sparked in Louisa’s stomach. She’d been excited to see Noah’s Bellevue Hill house even before he’d driven them into the clearly prestigious street. She just hadn’t expected it to be quite so incredible. Historic and beautiful, with enormous established trees in the front yard, she couldn’t think of many more idyllic places to live.

But when they walked upstairs from the garage and into the large, open living space, with sweeping views towards the water, her heart skipped a beat. Not only was it architecturally beautiful with an incredible view, but the whole house was decked out for Christmas in a style that would rival a fancy department store.

“It’s all so nice, Noah,” she said.

He lifted his shoulders. “It’s been in the family a long time.”

“Lucky you,” she murmured.

“Says she of the oceanfront palace.”

Louisa poked her tongue out at him as she walked towards the floor-to-ceiling

windows. “Just, wow,” she said, with a shake of her head.

“I guess I got used to this view too. Though you’re offering a definite improvement,” he said, and when she turned, she realized that her dress must have been catching the afternoon sun, revealing her figure through the flimsy fabric.

She smiled at him, her whole body dancing as if flames were licking through her. “And the Christmas obsession? You don’t look like an elf, but then, I’ve never met one in person.”

He popped the top off a bottle of champagne. “I know, it’s overboard.”

“No, it’s lovely.”

“For the North Pole.”

She slid him a sidelong glance, then gave the decorations more thought. It really was a lot. From an enormous tree—at least ten feet tall, in the middle of the bank of brown leather sofas to the garland that ran along every surface—and it wasn’t just this room either. She could see hints of Christmas in every direction, making her wonder if the whole house was similarly decked out.

“I got someone to do it,” he said, as though that explained the fact the house was dripping in festive green. He strode towards Louisa, holding out a long-stemmed glass of champagne. “Taylor used to love Christmas,” he said, with a shrug. “We’d take her to New York every year, a couple of weeks out, to let her choose an ornament from Macy’s and skate at Rockefeller. When she was younger, it was her favourite time of year. She’d ask to have Christmas carols playing all the time,” his expression was nostalgic. “I just thought?—,”

“You wanted to give her that magic again.”

He glanced at her ruefully. “Stupid, right?”

“No.” She put her hands behind his back, careful not to tip her drink. “Sweet. Very, very sweet.”

He looked down at her and something clicked in the region of her heart. He really was a great guy.

“Did she like it?”

“She hasn’t said anything.”

Louisa’s brows stretched up. “Aboutthis?” She angled her face to the side again, then back to him.

“I guess that means she must kind of like it, because the way she is these days, she’d never miss an opportunity to tell me if I did something she hated.”

Sympathy flooded Louisa. “She’ll get through this, Noah. I don’t think anyone ever said parenting was easy.”

They ate in a courtyard with views of the Harbour in the distance and Noah’s verdant, established garden in the foreground. A big old Oak had a tree house halfway up, and fairy lights ran from the limbs of the tree to the pergola overhead, giving it all a very Midsummer Night’s Dream feel.

Kristen served their food, and Louisa enjoyed seeing the easy relationship they had. “She’s been incredible,” Noah confided, “in terms of Taylor.”

It was a testament to how much Noah was getting under her skin that Louisa felt a surge of jealousy. “Yeah?”

“She has two daughters, in their twenties, so she’s been through it. Though neither of them ever rebelled quite like this.”

“And yet you still asked my advice?” She couldn’t help prompting.

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“Well, I was feeling particularly desperate that day.”

Her eyes widened.

He leaned forward and put his hand on hers, and sparks flickered inside her body.

“And I might have desperately wanted to see you again, socially.”

“You could have just asked me out.”

“I don’t think I was that honest, even with myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t done this for a long time, remember?”

“You haven’t even dated since Amy?”

He grimaced. “I know. Pathetic.”

“No, not at all.”

“When we moved to Australia, I made a choice that Taylor was going to have my complete focus. I just didn’t realise how much of me she’d need. It’s a bottomless pit, at the moment.”

“So, why me?” Louisa asked, her stomach swooshing.

Noah stared at her for a long time, between slightly narrowed eyes, then shrugged. “I’ve always had a thing for glossy brunettes.”

She laughed. “Hey!”

“I like your accent,” he added.

She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know,” he answered, finally, seriously. “I just felt like I needed to see you again.”

Her breath hitched in her throat because it was so simple, and so, so perfect. “Me too,” she said, so softly the words were almost carried away by the night air.

He’d fantasised about having Louisa here, in his bed, for a whole night, and now that she was fast asleep, he found he couldn’t settle. He paced his room and eventually pulled on a pair of shorts and a shirt, moving to the window and staring out of it. The big old Oak was a shadow against the night sky. He remembered climbing that tree as a child; he remembered his youngest brother falling out of it and breaking his arm. He paced to the bed, looked at Louisa, and sighed, then moved back to the window.

He was restless with a strange sort of energy. It was like the pieces of his life were moving in a way he couldn’t make sense of.

This was supposed to be casual, but it didn’t feel casual.

He had no idea how long Louisa was planning to stay in Sydney, but he knew he was limited in what he could offer her, anyway. Taylor remained his focus. There was no changing that. If she weren’t going through this disastrous stage of development, where she hated pretty much everything he said or did, maybe he could foresee a



future where Louisa could slot into his life more permanently.

Could even...what? Marry him? They'd known each other less than two weeks. Besides that, she'd just broken up with someone. It took him years before his marriage with Amy ended before he could even look at another woman.

Louisa acted as though Ares's engagement didn't bother her, but surely it had to, on some level at least.

She was close to her family; they lived in Moricosia. Had she said anything, at any point, to suggest she might consider permanent relocation?

And what if she did? Taylor might be like this for years. He had no way of knowing what the future with her held, but she was his kid, and he'd give her everything he had. But he wanted to keep seeing Louisa, in a way that would work for them. He'd prefer not to be hiding out in her place all the time, too. He wanted to date her properly, take her out, do things with her, but her concerns about the press were real and valid; there was no point pushing that.

Whatever way he looked at it, frustration spread through Noah, because he found he wanted something more and different, but knew he couldn't get it. But what if he threw caution to the wind and just rolled the dice on all this? Maybe Taylor wouldn't be so mean to Louisa? She had friends at school, presumably, she treated them well. Perhaps it was just Noah who got the full force of her acidic anger.

A rumbling noise caught his attention and he moved swiftly to his bedside table, where his phone was charging. Taylor's face filled the screen and a clutch of anxiety flooded his veins.

"Tay?" He answered softly, striding from the room. He could hear laughing in the background, and lots of voices. "Are you okay?"

“Dad?” There was a childlike quality to her voice he hadn’t heard in a long time.

“Are you home?”

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“Yeah, what is it, honey?”

“I—,” she sniffled. “Can you come get me?”

His gut rolled. Where was she? What was going on? “From Melanie’s?” he asked, careful to keep any note of judgement from his voice.

“No. Somewhere else. It’s—can you come?”

His gut dropped to his toes. Something was wrong with his daughter; of course, he’d go to her. He snatched up the keys and ran downstairs, into the garage and thrummed the engine. His own life and plans and hopes were all forgotten—Taylor was the beginning and end of his world; she always would be.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“IT WAS JUST MEANT to be a few people,” Melanie, in the backseat of the car, was explaining, her voice slurred by alcohol. Beside him, Taylor barely looked like herself. She looked...like her mother. She was wearing makeup, a mini dress, and heels, and she’d done something to her hair so it was all voluminous and curled. “To celebrate Christmas. You know how Tay loves Christmas.”

He wanted to tell Melanie—as sweet as she was—to shut up. Taylor had barely said two words since he’d pulled up out the front of a Rose Bay address and the girls had jumped into the car. Her slim legs were pressed together, her hands fidgeting in her lap. His gut was twisted with worry.

“I told your parents I was dropping you off,” Noah said, glancing in the rear-vision mirror so he had the satisfaction of seeing Melanie’s face pale.

Taylor whipped her face towards him, but for once she didn’t say anything. She might have been annoyed that he’d tattled on her friend but given the fact he’d just had to collect her from a clearly adult party, and she had obviously been drinking, shesomewhat had the judgement to know it wasn’t the time to grind his gears.

“Oh, okay,” Melanie slumped back in her seat. Silence throbbed in the car and Noah, who’d already felt as though his nerves were stretched tight, turned up the volume of the stereo. Metallica pumped out, the loud, bassy tones perfect for his mood.

When he pulled up at Melanie’s house, her parents were waiting out the front. “They said they were going to Alice’s,” they said in unison.

“Yeah, I got the same story.” He addressed Taylor then, “Was Alice at the party?”

She shook her head, without making eye contact with him.

“Melanie?” Melanie’s mother grilled the other girl, anger in her tone.

“No, mum. It was just us.”

“Well, come inside and wash that makeup off. God, you’re hardly dressed,” the mother bemoaned. “Thank you for bringing her home, Noah.”

He nodded once. “See you soon,” he said, and because he didn’t want to alienate Taylor’s friend, who was already annoyed at him, “Take care, Melanie.”

He got back into the car and turned to look at his daughter properly. She’d turned down the music, so it was just a low, background hum now. “What happened?”

“Can you just drive, please?”

He thought about that. He tried to separate his instincts as a dad from his instincts as a human in the world, who knew what sorts of things happened at parties like that. He wanted to pretend that everything was fine, but he couldn't put his head in the sand. She'd sounded distraught.

“Tay, I'm going to take you home.” He reached for her hand, and she flinched. His gut tumbled. “And I'm not mad at you. It's very normal to want to try new things at your age, that's okay. I'd rather you talk to me about it, so I know and can put some guardrails in place, but I promise, this isn't coming from a place of anger.”

She glanced across at him, surprised. Which was kind of offensive, given how tightly he kept a grip on his temper with her, for the most part, no matter what she said or did.

But worry for her had brought an eerie sort of calm over him.

“Did someone touch you tonight?” It physically hurt him to ask that question. To even contemplate what might have happened. Her eyes widened and her face paled and for a second, he feared the very worst answer he might receive.

Please, please let no one have hurt his baby girl.

“No, Dad. No. It's not that. It wasn't?—,”

He stared at her long and hard. He felt like she was telling the truth, but was that just wishful thinking?

“It was just too much,” she said, dropping her gaze to the console between them, then shifting in her seat, so she was all slumped over and tiny. “Everyone was older and

really drunk, and the smell...it was..." tears rolled down her cheeks. He ached for her. He didn't know what to do. He felt so alone. And in that moment, he wished, with everything in his heart, for Louisa. She'd know what to say, what to do. She'd be such a great mother one day.

Different feelings pummeled him then, feelings he didn't want to contemplate. Feelings like a lightness, when he imagined how different it would have been to have a baby with someone like Louisa, to have done things a different way around. To have been on the same page as your co-parent from the beginning.

He pushed the thoughts aside.

“I was scared,” she said, simply, and then closed her eyes and sobbed. “I’m such a pathetic idiot.”

“No,” Noah groaned, the words like knives in his gut.

“I am. Everyone’s going to know I couldn’t handle it.”

“Hey,” he put his hand on her knee—the only part of her that wasn’t all hunched up. “You did the right thing to call me,” he said, with utter confidence. “And believe me, no one is going to even remember this by the time school goes back. There’ll have been a dozen other parties with a million other things to talk about. Don’t worry, Tay. It’s all going to be okay.”

She was silent for the rest of the car trip. He didn’t want to think about the alcohol fog he could smell surrounding her, nor how she’d stumbled a little when she’d come to the car. He didn’t want to think about how unsafe she was, being drunk in a house of a hundred strangers, most of them over eighteen.

How the hell had she even gotten into the party? Who’d invited her? Who was she hanging out with? He knew nothing about her, clearly, despite his best efforts to be involved.

A bottomless pit, indeed.

Once inside the garage, he cut the engine and stepped out of the car, coming around

to her side and opening the door. She was half asleep. Or passed out.

He reached down and unclipped her seatbelt and she looked up at him with the same expression she'd had as a three-year-old who'd been woken early from naps. His heart squeezed and exploded. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Taylor. Nothing.

"Okay, pumpkin. Let's get you into bed. Everything will feel better in the morning."

"Dad—I'm—," she closed her eyes then and he sighed. He had no idea what she'd been about to say, but it didn't matter. He lifted her easily and cradled her to his chest, carrying her with the same care he'd exercised when she'd been a tiny newborn baby, and he'd thought she was so precious and fragile that he might accidentally break her.

He contemplated waking her, so she could get changed, but the best thing for her was to sleep this off, so instead, he laid her into the bed, removed her shoes, and placed a glass of water on the bedside table. Then, he leaned down and kissed her forehead, hoping she knew just how damned much he loved her.

"Louisa," his touch was gentle. Just a fingertip on her shoulder, gliding over her skin. She was so tired. Her whole body felt heavy. Her mind, too. But her heart was light. She smiled into the darkness, through the exhaustion.

"What time is it?"

"I'm sorry to wake you."

Something in his voice did exactly that, though. She blinked blearily, trying to bring him into focus. "What's happened?"

Silence.



She reached out for the lamp she remembered seeing on his bedside tables and pulled a cord. A soft warm glow meant she could see Noah's face. The tension and tightness in his whole body.

"Noah?"

"It's Taylor."

Louisa's gut twisted with worry. "What about Taylor?"

"She's fine, but I had to go get her and her friend from a huge party. I'm pretty sure she's drunk. So was her friend."

"Oh, gosh."

"So she's here, and I thought?—,"

"I should go," Louisa said instantly, even though there was a part of her that rebelled against that. Even though there was a part of her that was angry about that. But Noah's relief was obvious.

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "It's just?—,"

"No, it's fine. You don't need to apologise," she said, thinking how much she wanted him to, even when this obviously wasn't his fault. "These things happen." Especially when you started dating men with teenage daughters. "Really, it's no big deal," she promised.

"It's just—I know I said I wanted you to meet her, but she's—tonight was?—,"

"No, I get it," she said, something strange and heavy overtaking her heart, ice in her

veins. “We already agreed we’d keep this on the down low; meeting her wasn’t part of it. It’s no big deal.”

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But it felt like a big deal. As she dressed, quickly and silently, and looked around for the little items she'd casually left out in his house, because she'd had visions of a lazy, relaxed morning together, and all the time in the world to pack up, she felt there was something tawdry about what they were doing, and the way she was being dispatched.

She could totally see it from his perspective, but that didn't change how she felt, in that moment.

"Okay, that's everything," she said, struggling to meet his eyes as she slid her feet into her shoes and looked around at the Christmas tree—now sparkling, because the lights were on timers—and their empty champagne flutes on the side of the kitchen sink.

"Louisa—," He stared at her and her stomach stitched as she waited for him to say something. But instead, silence just hung between them.

And then, "Dad?"

Louisa's eyes flared and Noah turned to intercept Taylor, but it was too late.

She stumbled into the room, hair a mess, a picture of long, slim limbs and stunning features. She saw Louisa, but perhaps barely registered her. "I feel sick."

Sympathy swelled inside Louisa.

Anger at Noah disappeared—for now.

Because this was his daughter, and she needed her dad.

“This way,” he said, guiding her toward a door which Louisa knew housed a toilet. The next moment, the sounds of vomit filled the house. She bit into her lip and stood there uncertainly for a moment and then loaded her Uber account and ordered a car.

In between the waves of sickness, Noah emerged to grab a glass of water and some paper towels.

“My cab will be here in two minutes,” she said, making no effort to move towards him. He wasn’t her Noah now. He was Noah, the father. Taylor’s, not hers.

“Thank you,” he said, simply, and she nodded once before leaving the room and letting herself out of his house.

Her driver seemed to think it was his job to entertain her, and he chatted the whole drive home. He’d asked where she was from, having detected her accent, and she’d responded shortly, with ‘Moricosia’. It turned out to be one of his favourite places to visit, and so the ride was filled with him extolling the virtues of her home country, the beauty of it, the beaches, and in that moment, she was flooded with a sense of homesickness. For her parents, her sister, her old life.

She’d decided not to go home for Christmas. It would have been too high profile even before Ares had met Sofia, but with an engagement announcement imminent, there was no way she could have just had a nice, normal Christmas with her family.

But now she ached to be with them.

At first, she couldn’t understand why. What had happened tonight that was making her crave her family? But once she was back in the solitude of her apartment and had the luxury of being able to think, she easily connected the dots.

Noah and she had created a beautiful thing, behind closed doors, but it was a fantasy. He had a life, a family, and she wasn't a part of that. She couldn't be, she wouldn't be, they'd said that from the outset. It was fine. Except it wasn't fine, because Louisa felt excluded and lost, and the kneejerk reaction to that was a desire to go home. To go back to the people who always made her feel welcome and whole, the people who considered her to be a necessary part of their fabric.

Everything with Noah had gotten out of hand. It had moved too fast. They'd seen each other every night since that first night. They'd been so intimate, they'd talked so much, shared so much. She knew more about him now than she probably had Ares. It was an unnatural connection they'd forged because of the backdrop of their respective realities.

What had they been thinking? Where did either of them think this was going?

Tonight had not been Noah's fault, and he certainly hadn't done anything wrong. On the contrary, he'd done exactly what was required of him, and she loved what a great father he was. But it had clarified something for Louisa, and now that she'd seen it, she couldn't unsee it: she didn't belong there, with him, like that. And if she kept seeing him, the way she was seeing him now, it was going to end very badly for her. It was impossible to be together with this intensity and not eventually want more, but Noah wasn't offering more, and she doubted he ever would.

She knew what that meant, but Louisa didn't define the conclusion to that thought train. Not then. She went to bed and tried not to contemplate the end which she knew was coming.

The early morningsun coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows roused him, and for a disorientating moment, Noah had no idea where he was. Why was he on the sofa, instead of his bed, with Louisa?

And then, it all came slamming into him. Memories of Louisa standing just a few feet from where he now lay, something shifting in her expression that he couldn't put his finger on but instinctively knew he didn't like.

Something that had chilled him to the bone.

But Taylor had needed him, and he hadn't been able to give Louisa anything. Even a ride home. Or to walk her to the door.

"Taylor," he muttered, standing up and looking around, his heart rushing because he had fallen asleep sometime after three, when it seemed that she'd vomited all she was going to vomit, and he'd gotten her to eat half a piece of Vegemite toast.

He walked quickly through the house, then softly clicked open the door to her room.

She was in bed, eyes shut, and when he got close enough to see properly, he could see that her chest was moving with each breath she took. So, she'd survived her first drunken night—he hoped it would be the last.

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She'd showered and changed into a pair of pajamas—he didn't know where or when she'd got them, because at fifteen, Taylor did all her own shopping, but they were Christmassy, with a cat on the front in a Santa's hat and the words "Miaowwy Christmas" down the bottom.

His heart lurched.

She was alive, it was still early, and Louisa...Louisa would understand all this, because she was Louisa, and Louisa was, in pretty much every way, perfect.

"Oh, hi," Louisa opened the door to find Noah standing there, holding two take-away coffee cups and a brown paper bag. Every feeling she'd experienced the night before slammed into her, so her heart felt as though it was being crushed beyond recognition.

"I brought breakfast."

She stared at him, frowning, because she wasn't ready to see him yet.

"It's early."

"You wake early."

She nodded, standing there without letting him in. She was confused.

"I wanted to apologise," he said. "I thought pastry would help my cause."

She opened the door wider, remembering their first kiss, right here. Her heart trembled. “You don’t need to apologise. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, but the whole situation was a shame. I was looking forward to waking up with you at my place.”

“How’s Taylor?” she asked, clicking the door shut and locking it.

“Asleep, having thoroughly purged her body of whatever choice of alcohol she put into it.” There was a wave of tension in his voice, and she understood it. Worry for his daughter must have been consuming him. But Louisa pulled something protective around herself because she realized how much danger she was in here.

He placed the bag on the counter, then handed a coffee to Louisa. She took it—coffee was hard to say ‘no’ to. “Thanks.”

“I thought I’d do something with her this afternoon,” Noah was saying. “Take her out on the water.”

Louisa’s brow lifted despite herself. “Because sea sickness is what she needs right now?”

Noah grinned. “Could be a good punishment?”

Her heart stretched and burst. She sipped her coffee, then placed it down with fingers that were a little trembly. “Noah,” she said, but he held a hand up, to forestall her.

“Don’t,” he said, shaking his head, moving towards her.

“Don’t what?”



“I can tell by your tone that this isn’t going to be good. Don’t do it.”

Louisa’s emotions had always been free-flowing, but dating Ares, she’d learned—or rather, been taught—to control them. She’d learned not to express frustration, anger, sadness, sorrow. The only acceptable emotion she could show in public was happiness, and even then, not too much. A polite smile, a small laugh, always mindful of cameras and angles. It had been so taxing, but she was glad for that training now as she was able to control the tears that were stinging the backs of her eyelids.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re annoyed at me.”

“No,” she shook her head quickly. “I’m—,” but she couldn’t find the right words and she stood there, gaping. “I just?—,”

He waited, patiently, which just made everything worse.

“You’re a father,” she said, with a lift of her shoulders. “First and foremost. I know that, I’ve known it this whole time. But last night, I felt...I saw...your world, and I was like a stranger, looking in from the outside.” Her brow furrowed, but now that she’d started, she didn’t want to stop. “I hated that.”

“You’re not a stranger?—,”

“There are so many limits to what this can be,” she said, determined now. “But we’ve been acting as though...” There, she found it hard to put into words. “We’ve been treating it like this is the beginning of something, you know? But the beginning of what? You have Taylor, and I’m from another country, which is myhome,” she said, forcefully. “There’s no long-term happy ending for us, so what are we doing, Noah?”

What are we doing?” And for the last sentence, her control snapped. She sounded as devastated as she felt. “I’m not annoyed at you, and you did nothing wrong. Last night just clarified everything for me. And I’m glad. Because we’ve only been doing this a week and a half. A week and a half!” She repeated, with a shake of her head, because she felt as though Noah was a part of her body and soul.

“Louisa, listen?—,”

“No, I need you to listen,” she said, and she crossed the room so she could grab his face with both hands and hold him steady. “I can’t go through anything else yet. It’s too soon. Three months ago, I walked away from my life, my future, from the man I thought I was going to marry, and now he’s getting married to someone else, and I’ve been okay with everything, but this, you...if you hurt me...if this hurts me...I just don’t think I can take it.”

### CHAPTER NINE

HE SAT IN HIS car and stared straight ahead, his blood pounding in a way that was new and different, as Louisa’s words replayed through his mind.

He refused to accept that this was the end.

It couldn’t be.

Everything was so great with them. It had been so great, the night before. He had loved seeing her in his house. All he could think, as they’d eaten dinner on the terrace, was how right she seemed in the home that had been a part of his family for generations. How much he wanted to do this more.

But then, he saw her face, and he heard her plea, at the end. If this hurts me, I just don’t think I can take it. There was no way he could ignore that. She was begging him to give her time and space, she was begging him to back off. She was right about one thing—everything between them had become really serious, really fast. Without their

noticing it. Case in point: the idea of having a night without seeing Louisa was anathema to Noah. That wasn't right. Not for what they were. From the beginning, they'd expressed their limitations. He knew she was new totown, and not here permanently, and he'd been clear about his responsibilities to Taylor.

Nothing had changed, even when it all seemed so different.

He groaned into the car and slammed his palm against the steering wheel. What choice did he have? Taylor was his daughter; she came first.

But...other single parents dated. Other single parents allowed themselves to have a life of their own, too. Maybe he was doing Taylor a disservice by not giving her credit of being able to accept this? Or maybe he was wrong to make his whole existence revolve around her, setting her up with unrealistic expectations for the rest of her life?

He expelled an angry breath, took one last look at Louisa's front door and then pulled out from the kerb. Nothing was going to be solved by sitting still. He needed to think. Or maybe he needed a second opinion.

"Fox," the voice, as familiar to Noah as his own, came through his car speakers after three rings.

"Hey, it's me," Noah said, unnecessarily. "Got a sec?"

"Is everything okay?" Max Fox asked. "It's early."

"Shit, yeah. I forgot the time difference." Max was over in Perth, overseeing one of the Fox family pearl farms. "Were you sleeping?"

Max laughed. "No. What's up? All good?"

“Not exactly.”

“Is it Mum and Dad?”

“No, no.”

“Taylor.”

“No,” Noah laughed, despite the gloom of his mood. “And yes. Kind of.”

“What’s happened?”

Noah gripped the steering wheel a little more tightly, and then gave Max the discreet, PG version of events. Max listened to the whole thing, without interjecting.

Then, “So you like her?”

He thought of Louisa and something in the region of his heart panged. “Yeah.”

“Really like her?”

Noah pulled up at a set of lights and stared straight ahead. His mind was full of Louisa. “Yes, but she’s pretty adamant that it needs to stop.”

“Because you made her feel like an outsider,” Max said. “No woman you’ve been treating like a partner suddenly wants to feel like they don’t belong.”

Noah frowned. “I didn’t mean—it was just Taylor?—,”

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“Oh, we’ll talk about Taylor’s choices later,” Max grunted. He’d always hated Amy and had been very wary of the other woman’s influence on Taylor. “But in the meantime, you have to work out what you want. If you think that’s Louisa, in any capacity, then you can’t run around behind Taylor’s back indefinitely. And nor should you. She’s fifteen, not five. She can handle the thought of her dad dating some other woman.”

“I don’t know if she can.”

“She has to. You and Amy broke up, effectively, years ago. And with very good reason. Taylor can’t keep living in a fantasy land of her mother being a perfect angel.”

Noah considered that. “Amy’s not a bad person, Max.”

“No, she’s a sick person, and you have done everything you possibly can to help her get better, and to keep your daughter safe in the meantime. But you’re allowed to have a girlfriend, Noah. You’re allowed to have a life.” Max sighed into the phone. “If Taylor was still a little girl, I’d be all for the decisions you’re making to insulate her from reality. But she’s fifteen and capable of understanding the nuances of adulthood.”

The lights changed and Noah accelerated through the intersection, mulling on that. “I guess there’s sense to what you’re saying.”

“Damn straight. So, tell me more about Louisa.”

And Noah smiled because he didn't know where to start. She was the first woman he'd actually felt this way for. He'd met Amy so young, and then they'd had Taylor. After he'd left Amy, he'd put all his energy into being a father, so in effect, Louisa was the first woman he'd actually cared for and wanted to pursue. "I like her," he said, simply. "I like everything about her, from the way she is to the way she makes me feel. I don't want to stop seeing her."

"Then you need to talk to Taylor, and Louisa. And I'm here for you, man. Any time."

Noah disconnected the call with a renewed sense of purpose, as he drove through the streets of Sydney, towards his home.

Taylor woke sometime after lunch, her skin ashen, hair a mess, eyes determinedly dodging Noah's. He handed her another piece of vegemite toast and watched while she ate it, then drank some orange juice.

"Better?"

"Yeah," her voice was a little hoarse. "I—thank you for last night."

He arched a brow.

"For coming to get me. And being so cool about it. I freaked out."

He nodded slowly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Her eyes met his and then fired away quickly. She shook her head. "It's too hard to explain."

"Nothing happened I need to know about?"

She bit into her lip and shook her head.

“Okay,” he accepted that at face value, though he suspected there was more to it. He didn’t want to push. No, that wasn’t right. Noah knew, instinctively, that if he were to push, Taylor would push back. Or shut down. He took a page out of Max’s book. “I’m here any time you want to talk.”

He half expected an acerbic rejoinder, but to his surprise, and relief, Taylor simply nodded tightly, her fingers toying with a crust of toast.

“So,” she said, glancing up at him again and then away. “Who is she?”

Noah felt all his senses tighten. He was on the edge of a precipice, and he had no idea what was beneath him. But he knew he had to jump, to take that risk.

“Her name’s Louisa.”

“Louisa,” Taylor said, with a hint of her now-standard acidity. He bristled to hear Louisa’s name spoken with anything like disrespect, but in fact, it only motivated him to keep going.

“Look, Tay, your mom is the only woman I’ve ever been serious about, but you’re the best thing about our relationship. We didn’t make each other happy, and our marriage broke down a really long time ago. If it weren’t for you, we probably wouldn’t have lasted about a year,” he said, being brutally honest.

Taylor stared at her toast crust like it was a new form of human.

“I haven’t been with anyone since her. I haven’t been interested in dating, because being your dad is kind of it for me right now. But then, I met Louisa, and it just happened really quickly.”



“What are you trying to tell me, Dad? Are you...is she moving in?”

He looked across the room and visions of Louisa here, in his house, treating it as their house, made his blood fire with warmth and speed, but he shook his head quickly. If that were to happen, it was a million miles from where they were now.

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“I don’t know what the future holds,” he said, choosing not to make a promise either way. “But I know that I like her and that she makes me happy, and that I want to keep seeing her.”

“Right.” Taylor’s features were pinched, and her fingers shook a little.

“Nothing will ever change between us, Tay. You’re my daughter, and I love you more than life itself.”

“But I don’t make you happy.”

Not lately, no, he felt like saying. “There are different kinds of happy,” he said, after a beat. “This is a very grown up?—,”

“I’m not a kid, Dad. Clearly, you’re sleeping with her, I get it.”

He stared at his daughter, who had become a young adult without his really realizing that, lips parted. “I wasn’t referring to sex,” he responded, treating her like the mature adult she clearly wanted to be. “I just mean, when you’re grown up and you date someone, and they’re right for you in so many ways, it kind of feels like you’re walking on air.”

Taylor stood up abruptly. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want to keep seeing her.”

“That’s not my decision.”

“Yes, it is.”

She stared at him.

“You’re my daughter, and I swore, the day you were born, that I would do absolutely everything I could for you. Always. That I would sacrifice anything. And as much as I enjoy spending time with Louisa, if you hate the idea, then that will be it.” He felt a stitch of pain deep in his gut when he thought of never seeing Louisa romantically again. “But if you would at least give this a try, see how you feel about her, and having her in both our lives...”

“I have a mother.” She wrapped her arms around her torso. “I know you’re trying to wipe her out of my life, but she’s real. She’s mine. She loves me.”

“I know she loves you,” Noah said, aware that this was suddenly going very badly. “And Louisa would never try to take her place.” Hell, he didn’t even know what Louisa wanted. “But if she’s in my life, I think she has to be in your life, to some degree. I don’t want to hide someone important from you.”

“Important,” Taylor repeated, as though he’d just threatened to kill a kitten.

“Yes, important.” It was the perfect way to describe Louisa. “I don’t know what our future holds. She’s probably going to go back to Moricosia at some point, but while she’s here, in Sydney, I want to be with her.”

“God, Dad. This is...I don’t need this today.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t need that last night,” he said, then wished, immediately, that he could take the words back, because Taylor’s face flashed with guilt, and he had no idea what had actually gone down at the party, only that it must have been serious for his daughter to reach out to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. You can always call

me. Anytime you need me, I promise you that.”

She looked like she wanted to fight him, but in light of the fact he had gone to collect her the night before, without judgement or reprimand, the reality was at least on his side.

“I really don’t care,” she snapped. “If you want to hook up with half of Sydney, go right ahead. It’s your life, not mine.” And she stormed from the room, slamming her door for good measure.

Noah didn’t go to work that day, and even though Louisa was glad not to have to see him again after that morning, she felt his absence like a spreading bruise, deep in her flesh. Every time the door to her office opened, she looked up and expected to find him striding in. Memories of how they worked together—zigging and zagging in unison—were thick in her mind.

But so was the reality of the night before, and how right she’d been to end it.

She’d hated how it had felt to be on the periphery of his life. Suddenly, the fact that he was a father, and she didn’t belong in his family had cut her to the very heart of her being. Because she’d wanted to belong. She’d wanted to be a part of his life. All of it.

Tears threatened and she swallowed quickly, glancing at the clock across the room. Usually, she’d stay another hour, but it was already well past five. She packed up her desk efficiently, moved out of the office, and said good night to Rose on her way to the elevators.

“Oh, Louisa,” Rose called. “Noah asked me to give you a message.”

Louisa froze, her heart leaping into her throat as she turned around, doing her best to

maintain a serene appearance.

“Oh?”

“He asked you to meet him at the hotel. He wants to show you some of the facilities, for advertising purposes. There’s a car waiting downstairs.”

Louisa stared at Rose, waiting for the words to filter through her brain and then to fully make sense, but in truth, she was totally confused. And uncertain.

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Was this actually about work? Or was he going to pick up where they left off that morning? And which of those did she want it to be?

She didn't know, she realized, as the lift cruised downwards, and her heart kept racing and throbbing in her chest. So, she decided to go, to see what he had to say. She could always leave again right away. It didn't hurt—much—just to listen.

She'd seen a hundred photos of the hotel, but walking into it was like something else. The opulence was so phenomenal and yet comfortable at the same time. Her heels clicked as she crossed the polished marble floor, looking around for Noah. A man in a formal suit approached her. While it was a warm evening outside, in the Fox hotel, the temperature was perfectly comfortable—perhaps even a little cool.

“Miss Petrakis?”

She stopped walking, eyes narrowing as she regarded the concierge.

“Yes?”

“Mr Fox is waiting for you.”

Of course he was. She compressed her lips. “Where?”

“This way, please.”

She followed the man across the foyer, towards the bank of elevators. With a press of a button, the doors opened. The man swiped a card, then smiled at her as he stepped

out of the elevator. A moment later, it was whooshing upwards. Louisa pressed her back against the glass, trying to steady her nerves, to calm herself, to brace for whatever was coming. But that was hard to do when you had no idea if this was going to be business or pleasure.

From the outset, they'd promised that the personal side of things wouldn't get in the way of the professional, and she knew she had to hold to that pledge. But in that moment, her personal feelings were making it hard to focus purely on the business.

She was torn between what she wanted, and what she needed. What she wanted? Noah. What she needed? To be smart, and to protect herself.

The doors pinged open and when she stepped out, Noah was, as the concierge had said, waiting. Wearing jeans and a T-shirt, with his hair swept back from his brow, and his feet bare, in what was clearly a penthouse.

Filled with roses.

Her pulse gushed in her ears.

"Hi," he said, his smile a little uncertain. "Thanks for coming."

She nodded once. "Rose said you wanted to show me the facilities. For advertising purposes?"

"Well, there's that too," he admitted. "But really, I wanted to talk to you."

Her eyes swept shut. She was happier than she should have been about that. But her self-defenses came to the fore. "I think we said it all this morning?—,"

"No, you spoke, and I listened, and I've thought about what you said all day, and I

have some things I'd like to say back."

She stared at him, eyes wide.

That was fair enough, wasn't it?

"You were right. I wasn't prepared for last night, and I didn't know how to handle it."

"You didn't do anything wrong."

"Yes, I did. I shouldn't have woken you. You're someone in my life, and I like having you in my life. And instead of accepting that Taylor would need to learn about you, and get over her first reaction, I pandered to it and tried to hide you. Like I was ashamed of you, or something. Which, for the record, could not be further from the truth." He took a step towards her, then stopped, pushing his fingers through his hair so the once neat style was now messy in a way that, of course, made him look even better.

"I have spent so long looking at everything through the lens of being Taylor's dad that I totally failed you. I forgot that I'm also," he paused, staring at her, shaking his head a little then smiling. "I'm yours, too."

"Mine," she whispered, twisting her hands in front of her, emotions swelling.

"Yes. All yours." He shrugged. "I know this is fast, but I love spending time with you, and I don't want us to walk away from this. Not because of Taylor. If you're over me, if you're still in love with Ares, or you want to go home, or whatever, then those are all perfectly valid reasons to end this. But if you care about me like I care about you, then please—be patient with me while I work this out. I'm going to make mistakes, but never doubt how much I want you, Louisa."



Her eyes swept shut because it was just too, too much. It was everything she wanted to hear. Somehow, he'd known exactly the right tone to strike. A balance between honesty and promises.

“How does this work?” she asked, quietly.

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His eyes met hers and clung there. “We take it one day at a time.”

She nodded slowly. “I still don’t want the press?—,”

“I agree. We’ll keep it low profile. But I want you to come to my house. Meet Taylor—even though I freely admit she’s not particularly pleasant to be around right now. She’s still my daughter, and I want her to know you. Because you matter to me, Louisa. You really, really matter to me.”

Her eyes swept shut and she tried not to think about how no one had ever quite made her feel that way before. How this was all so different and new. And perfect, despite its imperfections. She moved forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him with all of the emotions she’d been feeling that day, kissing him for so long that she didn’t realise she was crying as well, until she tasted salt and pulled away from him.

His look was one of concern.

“Happy tears,” she promised. And she was happy. In that moment, in the perfect bubble they’d created, her happiness was pure and easy. She had no idea if that would last in the real world, but she was going to make the most of it for now.

## CHAPTER TEN

A WEEK LATER, LOUISA waited out the front of Noah’s house with a bottle of wine in one hand and a bunch of flowers in the other, looking somewhat longingly at the car that had dropped her off, arranged by Noah, which was currently speeding

away. Leaving her stranded out the front of Noah's, for a dinner date with him and Taylor, that was now feeling like a terrible idea.

She was nervous.

The woman who, in another life, might have been Queen by now. Who had been on Ares's arm when they'd entertained other Kings, Queens, Politicians, Hollywood stars. She'd never felt anything other than at home in those circumstances, but just the prospect of meeting a fifteen-year-old flooded her with uncertainty.

But that wasn't really about Taylor.

It was what this moment meant. It was what Noah meant to her. Somehow, over two weeks, he'd become a part of her soul, and she couldn't even remember what life had been like before him.

They lived and breathed one another. At work, they were the perfect complement. He listened to her ideas, encouraged her, pushed her, made her wonder if maybe advertising was her true calling after all. And every now and again, he'd suggest something she might have missed, or explained something about the heritage of Fox hotels, and it would spark a dozen more lightbulb moments. He both enabled and admired her curiosity. And at night, in the privacy of her home, they'd rebuilt the connection that had wavered slightly, reaffirming their places in each other's lives. Then, as Friday had rolled around and the Fox offices closed for two weeks over Christmas, Noah had asked her over to celebrate.

"We'll keep it brief," he'd said, by way of inducement. "I have no idea what Taylor will be like, but if we can just get through a meal..."

The door opened and Noah stood on the other side, thunderclouds on his face.

Louisa's heart dropped. "Hi."

His smile was more of a grimace, but he leaned forward and pulled her into an embrace, before kissing her quickly on the mouth. As was now normal for Louisa, her pulse twisted and turned.

"Is everything okay?"

"Oh, you know," he shrugged. "I'm glad to see you."

She thrust the wine bottle towards him, and the flowers, which had been bought for Taylor and now seemed a little silly. They were very Christmassy though, with Holly, Ivy and baby's breath making a delightful arrangement, regardless. They'd fit right into his Santa's grotto lounge room.

In the kitchen, she saw dinner was in progress. With no sign of Taylor.

"You're cooking?"

"Sure am."

"I didn't know you cooked."

"My stepmother insisted on it."

Louisa knew now that Noah's mother had died shortly after his youngest brother was born. He had no real memories of her, but her stepmother had loved him like a son and had insisted that they celebrate the boys' birth mother each year and keep her memories alive with stories about her. It was something Noah hadn't appreciated as a boy, but as a grown man, Louisa knew that he saw what a kindness that was. The boys had never needed to choose between their loyalty to either mother.

“Can I help?”

He turned to face her. “Sure, I’ll get you an apron.”

When she stepped into the kitchen, he hooked it over her head and fastened it at her waist, his hands lingering there, before spinning her and holding her in the circle of his arms. Their eyes met, and held, and Louisa felt a spark in her veins. Fireworks.

They burst between them with the power of a thousand suns, as though they were now an intrinsic part of her connection with Noah.

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Christmas was only a week away, and the knowledge that he'd be going to the outback property to spend it with his family was a wrench. Partly because she didn't want to be away from him for Christmas, but mainly, because she didn't want to be away from him at all. Not even for one night.

He'd be gone for four nights. Noah had invited her to go too, but she'd refused. It was way too early to foist herself on his family, and she could imagine how Taylor would resent her for that. Instead, Noah had booked her into the penthouse at the Fox hotel, then told her he'd planned surprises for her each day, so to sit back and enjoy. It was both thoughtful and perfect, given that she couldn't go home to be with her family, or be with Noah.

Ares had been in touch to advise her that the official engagement announcement would be made on the morning of Christmas Eve, so there was not much longer to enjoy living under the radar. She knew the storm it would stir up, and in some ways, being in a hotel would make that easier, because there was tighter security and guest protection, particularly somewhere like a Fox hotel.

"Okay, I think we're ready," he said, about a half hour later, pouring two glasses of wine and grabbing a bottle of mineral water from the fridge. "I'll just go get Tay." He hesitated, lines of tension radiating from his neck. "Make yourself at home."

Louisa's own nerves stretched and stretched, almost to breaking point, and finally, she expelled an uneven breath, moving to one of the chairs and curling her fingers around the top of it, holding on as if for dear life.

"Louisa," Noah's voice was deep and low, and she felt his own anxieties throbbing

towards her. So much so, that she yearned to put him at ease. “This is my daughter, Taylor.”

She smiled at the teen, who wore a pair of oversized jeans and a big t-shirt, her blonde hair scraped back into a messy bun. “Hi,” Taylor said, lifting her hand in a nervous wave, though her voice was the last word in reluctance.

“Hi Taylor, I’m pleased to meet you.”

“You’ve sort of already met me, remember? The other night?”

Louisa’s eyes widened at the teen’s acerbic tone. “Well, I heard you vomit,” she volleyed back, softening her rejoinder with a kindly smile. “That’s not quite the same thing as meeting you.”

She saw Noah’s expression shift from shock to bemusement.

“Kind of,” Taylor said, awkwardly, clearly not prepared to be called on her attitude. “Anyway, whatever. I’m starving, can we eat?”

Noah gestured to the table. “Dinner’s ready.”

Taylor walked towards it, then pulled a face. “I hate pasta.”

Louisa’s heart sank. Not because she cared what Taylor thought of her, but because of how she was speaking to her father. It was so clear to her, in those few moments, that Taylor had been given the world, and was now just seeing how far she could take it. And because Noah felt bad about Amy, bad for moving Taylor halfway around the world, bad for being a Fox and having enough money and renown to be somewhat famous, meaning Taylor couldn’t live a normal, private life. Bad for all of it. So, he’d spoiled Taylor and looked past her rudeness, blaming himself instead of doing what

any other parent on earth might have done and grounding her for a while.

Or maybe Louisa just really, really hated seeing Noah vulnerable to attack. Noah Fox, the man who could control a room with a single look, who was fierce and intimidating and admired by all, was being treated like dirt by his own daughter. It stank.

“Well, I love it,” Louisa smiled sweetly at both of them. “There’s garlic bread, too,” she gestured to the loaf in the centre of the table.

“Great. What a well-rounded dinner.”

Louisa’s eyes met Noah’s, and he shrugged, then shook his head a little as he took his seat.

Louisa reached for her glass of wine and took a large sip, glad for the cooling drink.

“Oh, Dad, by the way, Mom said she might be coming over for Christmas. I already told Gramma to make up a bed.”

Noah’s hands tightened visibly on his cutlery but otherwise, he didn’t react, and nor did Louisa. She was far from being jealous or insecure regarding the other woman.

“You don’t tell your grandmother to make up a bed,” Noah said, in a relaxed, conversational tone. “You speak to me, and I ask her if it suits. Gramma is not your servant.”

“Oh, well, she didn’t seem to mind.”

Noah curled some spaghetti around his fork and held Louisa’s eyes as he ate.



“What are you doing for Christmas, Louisa?” Taylor asked, her own voice sugary sweet now.

“I’m going to spend it in the city,” Louisa replied, imitating Noah’s calm, relaxed tone. Refusing to take the bait.

Despite her protestation that she didn’t like pasta, Taylor dug her fork into some spaghetti and twisted it around.

“You’re not going home?”

She thought of the press release that was in the offing and just imagined the fuss that would cause. “Definitely not.”

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“But you will go home eventually?”

Subtle, as a brick, she thought. “My plans aren’t really set in stone.”

Taylor frowned. “So, you might stay in Australia?”

Louisa glanced at Noah, then across at Taylor. “I really haven’t thought it through.”

“Aren’t you a little old to be doing the working holiday thing?”

Noah’s laugh was a spontaneous eruption, which he stifled behind a napkin quickly. “Taylor, that’s incredibly rude,” he said, his eyes still twinkling. “Though, you’re right. Age is a relative concept.” He winked at Louisa though, who caught a darkening of Taylor’s expression.

If the teen was trying to drive a wedge between them, she was failing miserably.

“It’s just, I thought you had a serious relationship back there,” Taylor insisted. “With the King and everything.”

Louisa’s heart turned over at the unexpected mention of Ares.

“Taylor,” the sparkle had died from Noah’s eyes and the thunderclouds were back. “Don’t say another word.”

“It’s no secret. You’re all over the internet. I just had to google your name and you came up. Hundreds of pictures of you and King Ares. He looks nice.”

Louisa's pulse was rushing; she felt ambushed, but she refused to give the younger woman any indication of that. Because she wasn't a young woman at all, she was still, in many ways a child.

"He is very nice," Louisa said calmly, slipping back into Queen-in-waiting mode. "We remain good friends, but there is no longer a relationship between us. That was my decision, and it was the right decision."

Taylor ate some pasta, nodding obnoxiously. "But you were together ages, and the break up's kind of fresh. So, you must still be kind of into him, right?"

Louisa looked at Noah, who shook his head once. "Taylor, listen?—,"

"I'm into your father," Louisa said, point blank. "I like him, a lot. So even if I were to go to Moricosia for the holidays, it would be to see my parents and sister, not my ex-boyfriend."

Taylor definitely hadn't expected to be one-upped. It was clear to Louisa that she was unused to having her rudeness challenged directly—something Noah really ought to be doing more regularly. It wasn't normal for a fifteen-year-old to rule the roost like this, no matter what she'd been through.

"Whatever. Can I eat in my room?"

"May I eat in my room," Noah corrected. "And no. We have company."

"No, you have company. I have a headache. I think it might be hormonal."

Noah ground his teeth but stared at his daughter for several beats before nodding. "Fine. You can come back out for coffee later."

Taylor scraped her chair back and stormed off, leaving them in peace.

And silence.

And more silence. Which stretched and stretched and stretched until Louisa, finally, laughed. A laugh that was borne of the ridiculous of this situation, by how terribly Taylor had behaved, and how utterly at a loss Noah was to explain it.

“She’s awful,” Noah admitted, burying his face in his hands. “Except, she’s really not. She’s just hurting...”

“Yeah, she’s hurting,” Louisa conceded, keeping the rest of her thoughts to herself. Not because she didn’t feel it was her place. Strangely, with Noah, she felt as though nothing was off limits. But she wanted to take some time to think and get some perspective. She was more than a decade older than Taylor; she could barely remember the nuanced emotions of that stage, and she knew she didn’t go through anything like a lot of kids did. Her sister being a prime example.

“That was a bust,” he said, shaking his head. “It will get easier.”

She lifted her shoulders. “I still get to share dinner with you. So, it’s not a total bust.”

His eyes landed on hers and the air between them seemed to hum with something magical and perfect.

“I’m sorry she found out about Ares.”

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Louisa pulled a face. “She googled me. That’s normal. Besides, it’s no secret.”

“I don’t even know how she knew your last name.”

“She’s a teenager. They’re excellent snoops.”

“You don’t seem annoyed?”

“I didn’t expect a bed of roses tonight.” Nor had she expected it to go quite like that. She placed her fork down and stood up, moving around the table to sit on Noah’s lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist like he never wanted to let go. “There’s a lot for her to get her head around. Like you said, we just have to give her time.”

“You are wonderful.”

“I know.” She smiled as she kissed the top of his forehead.

“Listen, about Christmas?—,”

She padded her thumb over his cheek. “It’s fine. It’s not even on my radar. I’m looking forward to the quiet time.”

He frowned. “Apparently a bed’s been made up back at the farm,” he said with a groan.

“You mean I wouldn’t get to share your bed?” She pouted, pretending disappointment. “Then I’m definitely not coming.” She caught his face in her hands.

“Is Amy going to be there?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s in rehab. She went in last week. Court ordered because she was picked up for drink driving again.”

“Taylor must know that,” Louisa said.

“It’s been kept out of the papers. I haven’t mentioned it, and nor has Amy.”

Louisa nodded slowly. “She must miss her mother terribly.”

“Yes,” Noah sighed. “Do you think I made a mistake, to separate them?”

“I mean, it’s not ideal, but nothing about the situation is. You said you felt she was unsafe, with Amy.”

“I tried to live near enough to her that Amy could still see Tay, supervised, but she started picking her up early from school, signing her out for ‘appointments’, and the stuff she exposed her to on those visits.” He shook his head as if to clear the memory. “I didn’t know, but there were parties, and ‘lunches’ at ‘friends’ houses, where I hate to think what was going on. I know Amy was drunk or high most of the time.” He expelled a rough sigh. “I just wanted to give Taylor a fresh start, and Amy a proper chance to focus on herself. I thought it would scare her into taking rehab seriously, if I’m honest.” He dropped his head forward. “I never intended to have sole custody. I was hoping she’d get clean and then we’d work out a series of holiday visits, a way for Taylor to have the best of her parents.”

“Maybe this time...”

He pulled a face. “You know what they say? Tenth time’s a charm.”

“Noah, it might be. You can’t give up hope.”

“You give me hope,” he said, finally, slowly, and he kissed her, in a way that made any thoughts of parenting, arguments, custody, the past all fade away, until there was only this.

Louisa went over again the next night, this time, with a bag. It had been a decision she and Noah had made, to show Taylor they weren’t backing down, but for the first time since things with Noah started up, she wasn’t relishing the night ahead.

Louisa cooked a traditional Moricosian rice dish, with almonds, nutmeg, chicken, raisins and eggplant. Noah took one mouthful and groaned. “This is so good.”

Pleasure flooded Louisa, her cheeks flushing pink. “My mother used to make this all the time. It’s one of the first recipes I learned, growing up.”

To her right, Taylor said nothing, but she kept lifting forkfuls of the meal to her mouth, so she must have liked it more than pasta. Louisa and Noah made small talk throughout dinner, mostly carrying on as though Taylor wasn’t there. They spoke about the hotel, and Louisa’s parents, and sister, about the places in Europe where the Fox family had hotels, and the cities Louisa had been to and loved.

When Taylor had finished eating though, and she’d gripped both sides of her bowl as if to leave the table, Louisa turned to her. “You’re on school holidays, aren’t you, Taylor?”

“Yeah, so?”

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“I was just going to ask if you’re enjoying them?”

“Oh, I’m having a ball,” she said, with sarcasm.

“That’s good. You must be heading into grade eleven next year?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any idea what you want to do after school finishes?”

“No.”

“You have ideas,” Noah corrected. “What happened to studying law?”

“It’s a five-year degree,” she said, shaking her head. “No, thanks.”

“Yeah, but five years goes by like this,” he clicked his fingers. “When you’re having fun.”

“I don’t think I’ll find more school ‘fun’.”

“University is different to school,” he promised her. “Much more freedom, and more people, too. You’ll love it.”

Taylor remained belligerently silent.

“Why did you want to study law?” Louisa asked, sipping her water.



“I just always wanted—,” Taylor compressed her lips, as if she just realized she’d forgotten to be snarky and regretted it. “What does it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” Louisa said with a lift of one shoulder. “I was just curious.”

Taylor stared at her plate. “May I be excused?”

Noah leaned back in his chair. “Taylor,” his voice held a soft growl.

Louisa watched as the young girl stared daggers at her father and then turned to Louisa. “Thank you for dinner,” she said, as though it was the last thing she felt like saying. But then, with more spontaneity. “It was nice.”

Louisa’s heart lifted at the very unexpected few words that had been genuine and somewhat normal. “You’re welcome. Any time.”

Taylor stood up, deposited her plate on the kitchen counter and then stalked from the room.

“I can’t get used to this,” Louisa said, swimming through the water with unconscious grace.

“Swimming at midnight?”

“Swimming right before Christmas,” she corrected. “Back home, we’ve already had snow in the mountains.”

“You get snow in Moricosia?”

“Only in the mountains to the west, but yes. And not usually this early in the season.”

“Do you miss it?” Noah asked, as he swam up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her wet body against his. Beneath the water, his legs paddled enough to keep them upright, so she could wrap her own legs around his waist and focus on him. And how amazing it felt to be so close and intimate like this.

“No,” she said, finally. “If I missed it, I’d go back.”

She felt him stiffen in response to that and she knew why. The future was an intangible beast, impossible to see clearly. There was the prospect of her returning to Moricosia, but everything had become so much more complex since meeting Noah.

“We could plan a trip,” he said, thoughtfully. “I’d love to meet your family.”

Her eyes widened.

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“See where you grew up. You know, go to your palace.”

She laughed, squeezing him a little tighter. He grinned at her, as he swam them towards the steps of the pool and sat on the second shallowest one, so she was on his lap, but still submerged in the refreshing water. The night was balmy and warm, the sky a deep, velvet black, the stars shimmering almost as if they were dancing. The lights of Sydney made a soft, ambient glow in the distance, and the black void beyond that was the ocean, full of mystery and stories.

“I think we should walk before we run,” she said after a beat, stroking his cheek.

“Too fast?”

“No. If it was just you and me, nothing would be too fast,” she said honestly. “But it has become very clear to me that I’m not just dating you. Taylor is a part of this, and until we work out how to be in the same room together without her wanting to kill one of us, I can’t imagine planning anything like a trip.”

“She’s like that just with me, you know. It’s not about you.”

“It doesn’t matter why she’s the way she is, it’s still something we need to be aware of, and respect.” She shrugged. “Hopefully in time, she’ll get used to this.”

“I just...” Noah frowned, his brows drawing together.

“What is it?”

“Are you willing to give me that time? To give us more time?”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel like this is way more than you signed up for...”

“I signed up for you,” she said. “And I don’t regret that, even a little bit.”

He pushed up so he could claim her mouth with his. “Are you a dream?”

“Why don’t you pinch me to find out?”

“Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?” he asked, as his fingers slid into the waistband of her bathers and curved around her bottom, which he did, indeed, pinch.

She made a soft moaning sound, and felt the throb of his arousal between them. All thoughts were forgotten, just as they had been the night before. Whenever they were close like this, it overtook everything else.

“Noah,” she murmured against his mouth. “We shouldn’t?—,”

“Louisa,” he kissed her again. “We really should.” And he lifted her from the pool, holding her easily against him, as he made his way not towards the deck and the living room, but rather, to the pool house, and all the privacy it afforded. Louisa had never been so glad for anything in her life.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

NOAH TAPPED HIS PEN against the desk, his mind racing miles ahead of him. He was thinking about Taylor, and he was thinking about Amy, and his family, and Christmas, but mostly, he was thinking about Louisa.

For years, he'd felt as though his life was a puzzle with so many pieces he just couldn't make fit together. His ex-wife had become someone he couldn't trust with their daughter. They didn't fit. His family hated his ex-wife. They didn't fit. His daughter resented him. They didn't fit.

And then, with Louisa, suddenly, the fact the puzzle pieces didn't fit didn't matter as much, because they fit. Maybe all that had been missing, all this time, was someone in his life who not only got him, but who also accepted him, and the messy complications he brought with him. Maybe life wasn't about making it all work out, all the time, but rather having someone by your side who wanted to weather the imperfections with you. To lean back in their chair and smile at you. The kind of smile that could warm you up, all the way through, even when your heart was breaking because your daughter was becoming someone you didn't recognize.

So, when Louisa walked into his office, a little before five, looking incredibly, edibly good in a silk blouse that was tucked into a high waisted pencil skirt, he felt that same warmth flood through him, but at volcanic lava heat levels.

"Hey," he practically growled, as she stood just inside the door, hand on hip, staring at him with eyes that were big and intense.

"I've been thinking about your trip suggestion," she said, fingers tapping her hip now. There was an energy to her, a sort of intensity that had him leaning forward, staring at her without the ability to look away. "And I've been thinking about Taylor, and you, and me."

"Yeah?"

"I know we said we'd go slow, give her time, but maybe what we need to do is go away somewhere after all." She stalked towards the window and stared out. Another day with bright blue skies and sparkling harbour water blinked back at them. "When I

was a kid, we'd do a family holiday each year. My parents were busy so much of the time, but that was when they'd really slow things down. No phones, no laptops, just us, card games, toasting marshmallows, reading books. Connecting. Maybe we just need to push through this and find a way to connect with her." Her face was flushed when she turned back to Noah. "What do you think?"

"I think Taylor..."

"I know, she's not ready," Louisa said with a grimace. "It was a stupid idea."

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“No, I love the idea,” Noah insisted, standing up and walking across to her, pulling her against him so his whole body charged with the kind of energy only Louisa was capable of invoking in him. “I love that you care enough to think about this, and I love that you want to make it work.” He kissed her. “When and where were you thinking?”

“Well, somewhere low-key,” she said. “You mentioned a wine region in South Australia. Maybe we could go on a road trip? Drive across the country, sing cheesy songs, talk, hope to get through to her?”

“You’d seriously be into that?”

“I’m going to want to get away after Christmas,” she said, lifting one shoulder, and Noah felt a blinding light of guilt. In the haze of everything pertaining to Taylor, he’d barely thought about Louisa’s past life and the fact an engagement announcement was coming any day now. “We could go for New Year’s.”

“How are you feeling about it all?”

She furrowed her brow.

“The announcement.”

“Oh, right.” She chewed on her lip. “I just want it to be over.”

“I know it might seem weird to say this, but if you want to talk about it... You must have some feelings about the man you were with for so long getting engaged.”

“I’ve told you how I feel, and I was honest about that. I’m happy for him. I’m actually looking forward to meeting Sofia next time I’m in Moricosia. I promise I’m not harbouring even a hint of jealousy or regret. I’ve never been more certain that I made a right decision in my life.” She stroked his back with her fingertips. “Have a think about it, while you’re back with your family. If you decide it’s a good idea, then...I’d like to do it.”

“Okay,” he said, recognizing that it was the least sufficient word he’d ever uttered. It did nothing to convey his wonder at her generosity and kindness, nothing to express how amazing he thought she was. The problem was, he felt those things in such abundance, he didn’t know how to say them. “Now,” he said, shifting his body a little so they were even closer, every part of them connected. “About tonight.”

“Yes?” She asked, breathily.

“Taylor’s staying at Melanie’s, under the strictest supervision, so we have the house to ourselves.” He moved again and her eyes shuttered a little, desire in her features so immediate and so obvious that it took all his self-control not to start undressing her then and there. “But,” he said, focusing on the matter at hand, rather than letting his libido run away with him. “I want to take you for dinner.”

She glanced up at him more fully. “Out?”

“When the press release comes out, it’s going to be hard, for a while, right? So, let’s make the most of the fact things are easier now, and go somewhere out of the way. Nowhere high profile, no likelihood of some paparazzi agency getting wind of you being there.”

“Okay,” she said, after a beat, and his chest tightened, because of the trust she was putting in him. “That sounds fun.” She tilted her head to the side. “But for the record, I also have a lot of fun staying in with you...”



“There’s plenty of that in our future, too,” he promised. And even though the future was a cloud of fog, Louisa was there, in the centre of it, like some kind of beautiful, magnificent waypoint he would always steer himself towards. At least, in that moment, that’s how it felt.

“You know the rules,” he said to Taylor, as he started the car.

“No alcohol, no parties, no social media.”

He gripped the steering wheel harder. “So, what will you guys get up to?”

“Watch Play School?” She said, but to Noah’s surprise, she tilted him a smile. “We’re going to watch the Blair Witch Project.”

“A classic. Nice choice.”

“We thought so.” Silence. He turned towards Melanie’s house. “What about you? Any plans?”

It was so unlike Taylor to ask, that he answered without thinking. “Actually, we’re going out for dinner.”

“You and Louisa?” He heard the hint of animosity, but chose to ignore it. His relationship with Louisa wasn’t a problem Taylor could wish away.

“Yeah. Somewhere low-key, so she’s not recognized.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You’re more famous than she is.”

He laughed. “I’m not famous.”

“You’re aFox, Dad.”

“You’re a Fox, too, Tay.”

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“But you know what I mean. You’re in the news with regularity.”

“I’m in the business papers, that’s not the same thing as being famous.”

“Okay, but what’s she famous for? Dating some King for a while?”

“You act like you don’t read gossip websites,” he said, shaking his head. “You know how people like her get treated. It doesn’t matter that they’ve broken up. Maybe in a year or two, it will matter less. But for now, the press still smells blood in the water, so we’ve been careful. But I want to take her out, like a normal relationship, before the press release comes out and it all goes a bit crazy.”

“Riiiiight,” Taylor said, in that nuanced way teenagers had, that could make adults feel old and as though they made precisely no sense. “So where will you go?”

At least she was making conversation; that was new. He turned into Melanie’s street.

“Just a little Italian place I know,” he said. “Somewhere quiet and out of the way.”

“Nice,” Taylor said, and his heart lifted, because she wasn’t being sarcastic or cruel.

“Well, have fun.”

He watched as she grabbed her bag and slung it over one shoulder. “Tay?” He called, stepping out of the car and walking towards her. He stared at her, slightly lost for words. “I want to make this work.”

She blinked at him.

“You and me. Louisa and me. You and Louisa. I want to make this work.”

For a second, something passed over her face. Anger. Irritation. Impatience. But then she nodded. “Okay, whatever. See you later.” She walked towards the house without looking back.

“Oh, crap.” In the midst of lifting her prosecco glass to her lips, Louisa turned her face away from the window of the little Italian restaurant so quickly it almost didn’t make sense, but then Noah, across the table from her, saw what she’d seen.

A flash.

And another flash.

She stood up quickly, keeping her face averted, and began to walk away from the table.

“Where are you going?” he asked, standing and following her.

“To the kitchens.”

“The kitchens?”

He looked over his shoulder to the small scrum of photographers.

“The toilets. Anywhere that doesn’t have a damned window,” she muttered.

He followed her into the ladies’ room, which was empty of other occupants. Guilt slammed into him, because this should never have happened. He should have just kept them home, at his place, where he could control this. Only, this restaurant wastiny and out of the way, just a little trattoria in a suburban area, beloved by locals,

but hardly a paparazzi haunt.

“You’re shaking,” he said, grabbing her hands and lifting them between them. He remembered her reacting like this once before. On their first date, when the kid had scooted towards Louisa, and he’d pulled her aside. A car had come around the corner, the lights had flashed, and she’d clearly been upset.

Because she’d thought it was a photographer.

“I’m just—I hate this. I’m all the way on the other side of the world to him; why do they care what I’m doing? Why does anyone care?” she asked, eyes huge when they met his.

“I know, I know,” he said, holding her against his body, stroking her back.

“I just sometimes feel like it’s never going to end. I’m always going to be King Ares’s ex-girlfriend. In ten years, twenty, it doesn’t matter what I do. It’s like the top line of my obituary is always going to feature his name. I hate that. This is so frustrating.” She pulled away from Noah and walked quickly to the other side of the bathroom, then back again. “How did they get here so quickly?”

Something twisted in his gut. Something he refused to acknowledge.

“We only just ordered our meals. That’s not long enough for any of the staff to have made a tip-off, even if they had recognized me. It’s almost like they knew we were going to be here.”

He shook his head, but he could see Louisa’s mind going where Noah didn’t want to.

“Noah,” she closed her eyes on a wave of emotion he hated. “Did you happen to mention our plans to Taylor?”

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He groaned. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't. "I did."

"God, Noah. Do you think it's possible..."

He stared at Louisa, thinking of the denials he could make. That he hadn't told Taylor exactly which restaurant they were going to, because he'd suspected he couldn't trust her. But then, how many little, out-of-the-way Italian restaurants did he go to? This had been his favourite for as long as he could remember. Taylor knew that; he'd brought her here on many occasions.

"Yes," he said, dragging a hand over his face. "I think it's possible."

Louisa's eyes met his and he felt a crushing sense of failure. Because he'd wanted to give Louisa the world and treat her like a normal woman, to take her out for dinner then bring her home, and instead, he'd walked her right into her worst nightmare. "I am so sorry."

She shook her head once. "It's not your fault."

"She's my daughter, my responsibility."

"She's fifteen. She makes her own decisions."

"But this is—I honestly can't believe she's capable of this."

At that moment, Louisa's phone buzzed. She pulled it from her pocket and closed her eyes. "It's the palace."

“The pala—oh, right.”

He watched as she answered, her hands still trembling. “Yes? I know. I’ve seen them.” She covered the receiver. “They’re going to send a car for me.”

Something speared through his gut. The feeling that she was walking away from him. That he was losing her. That she didn’t trust him to keep her safe. And why would she?

“I have a car.”

“It’s surrounded.”

“Then we’ll wait it out.”

“Noah—,” she ran a hand through her hair, then focused back on the phone. “That’s fine. Thank you.” She disconnected the call.

“Listen, this is not a big deal,” he said, frustration making his tone clipped.

“Not a big deal?” she repeated, staring at him as though he’d lost the plot. “Please, don’t say that to me.”

“I’m just?—,”

“You don’t know what it’s been like for me. You have no idea what my life in Moricosia was like. Being followed everywhere I went, having every single moment of my day documented online, with the least flattering pics getting the most hits, and therefore holding the most value, meaning there was a game to catch me out in weird expressions or from bad angles. And ever since the breakup, there’s been this whole damned narrative about me being jilted, never mind that I dumped him. I hate this. I

hate it. I came here to escape the press, Noah. I just needed..."

She'd needed something and he hadn't given it to her. He had failed her, all because he'd wanted this to seem normal. He'd wanted what their relationship wasn't, because they weren't a normal couple. They both had baggage and a high enough profile to have made this decision foolhardy.

"I know, I get it," he said.

"You don't," she responded, shaking her head once. "Or you would have never suggested this, you would have never told Taylor, and you would never, ever tell me that it's not a big deal."

He grimaced, because she was right. "I know. How can I fix this?"

She stared at him like he'd lost the plot. "You can't fix it. Don't you get that? I don't care about being photographed once, with you. I care about the narrative that this will now feed. The stories they'll write. I'll be seen as some kind of fortune hunter, jumping from a King to a King of Industry. I can see the clever, clickbait headlines already. And anytime anyone searches my name, this is what they'll come up with. Not my first class uni degree, not my charity work, nothing but this."

Okay, he hadn't got it. He hadn't understood because he'd never been on the receiving end of that kind of speculation. And yet... "But Louisa, correct me if I'm wrong, the way we've been talking, you weren't... this isn't exactly a temporary thing, for either of us, right? So, at some point, our relationship would have become public."

"At some point," she said with a tight nod. "Maybe. But when we wanted it to, how we wanted it to. When I was ready." Tears filled her eyes, and it was the worst thing he'd ever seen because Louisa was always so strong and in control. "I'm not ready,



Noah.” She pressed her hand to the centre of her chest. “What I’ve already been through this year...I just needed a break from it all. I’m not ready for it to start up again.” She turned her back on him so all he saw was the way she vibrated as she sobbed.

His gut dropped to his feet. “Louisa...”

“Please, just leave now. If you go, it’s one less logistic for me to consider.”

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“I’m not leaving you here.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, through another sob. “I’ve dealt with worse than this before.”

“Louisa, listen to me?—,”

“No, you listen to me.” She whirled around to face him. “I’m not angry with Taylor. She’s a kid, and she’s acting out, and we both knew that. And I’m not angry with you, either.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “But I do need you to go, and leave me alone, to deal with this. I’m asking you to respect my decision, and just go.”

He scrunched his hands into fists, wanting to fight her, but how could he? How could he when she was being so clear?

“The embassy car will be here soon. They’ll have security. I’ll be fine.”

“And how’s that going to play in the papers?” he asked, not because he cared about his own image, per se. But Louisa was his. Not a part of the palace any longer.

“It will look like Ares and I are still friends, which we are. It will look like he’s looking out for me.”

“How did the palace even hear about this so fast?”

“They have a whole social media team, Noah. I guess an image is already online.”

He swore, pulling his phone from his pocket and loading up Instagram. He’d only

downloaded the app to keep an eye on what was being said about Amy, to shield Taylor, but he was glad he had it now. He typed in Louisa's name and saw that she was right. Photos of her from forty minutes ago, as they'd walked into the restaurant, meaning someone had been out there, taking photos before they'd become aware.

Billionaire Rebound, someone had captioned the first image. He clicked out of it before he could read the accompanying text. Or comments. His gut sank as he acknowledged that Louisa was right. None of this was good for her.

"I wanted us to have a normal night out together," he said, quietly.

"I know." She closed her eyes. "I wanted that, too."

"Listen, the photos are out there now. The story's there. You want to control the narrative? Walk out of here like everything's fine. Like you don't give a shit. Hold my hand and get in my car, and come home with me, and let them write whatever they're going to write. They're going to do it anyway. Come home with me and block out the world at my place."

She shook her head. "There's no blocking this out. My parents read this stuff, Noah. It's not...we all needed a break for a while."

He dropped his head forward, the reality of that hitting him hard. Her parents. Her sister. Her past life.

He was going to kill Taylor. Not literally, but he was going to think of some kind of consequence for this that would make her realise how much she'd stuffed up.

"Please go," she whispered.

He stared at her, and nodded once. "Okay."

She bit into her lip.

“But let me say this first.” He moved across the tiled bathroom towards her and put his hands on her hips. “You are the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time. Probably forever. And what I care about, almost most in the world, is being that for you, too. Tonight was a mistake; it won’t happen again.”

She shook her head sadly. “You can’t promise me that.”

“I can promise to try.”

“I just need to think,” she whispered, pulling away from him then, and he felt as though he couldn’t breathe. “Let’s talk tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“WHAT THE HELL WERE you thinking, Taylor Fox?”

Walking through the front door the next morning, having been dropped off by Melanie’s mother, Taylor looked exhausted. He presumed the sleepover had not involved much sleep.

Despite the passage of the night, Noah’s temper hadn’t improved. Probably in large part because he’d done what he hadn’t wanted to do in the restaurant and come home for a deep dive on social media, losing himself in all the posts about Louisa.

And then losing himself in photos of her and Ares, and feeling like he was torturing himself for no reason because that was in her past. Never mind how happy they looked. He was sure if he hunted around, he could find some photos that told a similar story with him and Amy when they’d been a mess almost from the start.

“What?”

“You tipped off the press, right?”

Her eyes went wide, and her lower lip trembled. She dropped her bag to the floor and crossed her arms over her chest. Okay, she was ready for a fight?

“Why did you do it?”

Silence stretched between them, and he found himself desperately hoping she’d deny it. He needed her not to have been the culprit. Maybe there was some other answer. Someone else could have seen them and tipped off the press.

“For the money, obviously,” she said, with a roll of her eyes.

He braced his palms on the counter, anger and disappointment surging through him. His own daughter was unrecognizable to him. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” he asked, deathly quiet. “Why would you do this to her?”

“To her? To her? Is she all you think about, Dad? Don’t you care?—,”

“Don’t you dare act as though you’ve been wounded here. Yes, I care about Louisa. She is a wonderful, kind, brave woman who just wanted to get away from all that, and you fed her to the lions. Why the hell would you do this?”

She flinched.

“I have never been more ashamed of you in my life.”

She sobbed, and spun away from him.

“Don’t you walk away from me. We’re not done.”

“I’m done,” she screamed. “I am so done.”

“Stop.” His voice was naturally commanding, but he was still surprised when Taylor did freeze.

“What?”

“What’s gotten into you, Tay? Why would you do this?”

She whirled around to face him. “Why do you think?”

“I have no idea. I’m honestly at a complete loss. What did you stand to gain by hurting her?”

Taylor flinched. “Hurting her? Hurting her? What about Mom? What about me? Don’t you think we’re hurting too?”

He stared at her.

“You’re ruining my life.”

He felt as though his insides were shriveling up. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“I don’t want her.”

He stared at Taylor, finding it hard to breathe suddenly.

“I don’t want her in our lives.”

“Taylor—,” he tried to keep his voice calm.

“I’m serious, Dad. She’s not a part of this family.”

“She’s—,”

“You took me away from Mom. You owe this to me.”

He stared at her.

“I should be there for her.” Taylor wrapped her arms around her waist and sobbed. He stared at her, frowning, not understanding.

“Louisa?”

She glared at him witheringly. “For Mom.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know, Dad,” she ground out. “I know about rehab. I know about the car accident. I know about her addiction. How long did you think you could lie to me about it?”

He stared at her, as the bottom slipped out of his world. “How?”

“How? How? That’s what you care about?”

He stared back, with no answers. He had been so angry, but now he felt totally on the back foot. “How?” he asked again.

“Instagram,” she muttered.

“You don’t have Instagram.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, but Melanie does, and Becca does, and Halley does.”



He closed his eyes and felt everything tipping away from him. “I see. How long have you known?”

“Months.”

He opened his eyes and stared at her. “Oh, Tay,” he said with a shake of his head, as his daughter’s awful, awful behaviour suddenly started to make sense. “I wish you’d come to me about this.”

“Why? You didn’t show me the courtesy of honesty, so why would you expect it in return?”

He grimaced, because she had a point. “I didn’t want you—your mom—,” he dragged a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know if you would understand.”

“I’m fifteen,” she said again, tapping the side of her head in a gesture of frustration. “When are you going to realise that?”

He shook his head. He was messing everything up. He felt woefully ill-equipped as a father. He felt like a failure in every sense of the word.

“I just kept hoping she’d get better, and everything would be fine.”

Taylor sniffed. And then sobbed. His heart broke, and he recognized that no matter what, this was his daughter and he loved her, and he had to be right here, with her. He closed the distance between them and pulled her into a bear hug, and she didn’t fight him. She didn’t resist. She pressed her cheek to his chest and sobbed. They stayed like that a long time, him holding her, knowing that nothing mattered quite so much as making sure Taylor was okay. He’d made that promise to her the day she was born, and he never intended to break it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, quietly, stroking her hair. “I should have had this conversation with you a long time ago.”

“Yeah,” she sniffled. She pulled away from him, just enough so she could look up into his face. “At the party...”

He stiffened imperceptibly. “Yes?”

“I remembered,” she whispered. “I remembered Mom taking me to a party. The smell—the booze, the smoke. It was all so familiar. And I remember being so scared. I was only little, maybe eight or nine. I hid in the kitchen, and then you came, and you scooped me up and took me away, and I was safe. I’d forgotten, until that night. I’d forgotten how often she’d...”

“Yes,” he said.

“And all of a sudden, you were spending all this time away from me, and you were so happy, and I just...I didn’t want to lose you, Dad. You’re all I’ve got.”

“Oh, honey. You’re never going to lose me,” he promised, kissing the top of her head. “I will rescue you from any party, anything, any time. You have my word.”

“What about Mom?” she looked up at him, her eyes earnest. “How can we help her get better?”

“I’m doing my best. She’s in a great facility, so maybe this time...”

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Taylor squeezed her eyes shut. “Maybe.” The word was ambivalent, at best. She sighed. “Can we maybe just go to Gramma’s today? I know it’s a day early, but...I kind of just want to be away from all this for a while.”

He heard her plea, her sadness, her desperation. Such echoes of his own emotion. He thought of Louisa, and how desperately he didn’t want to leave her. But he knew he had to choose Taylor. He had to, because she was a child, and he was her father, and that was a sacred, unrelenting duty.

“Okay, we’ll go today,” he said, concealing his own wishes. “I’ve got some things to take care of this morning, but we can leave after lunch.”

She looked up at him, her expression briefly flashing with impatience but then she nodded. “Okay. This afternoon.”

He read the press release right before he got in the car, and his blood boiled as the words slammed into him.

Louisa Petrakis denies new romance. The piece went on to say that theirs was strictly a working relationship, that she was looking forward to seeing the fruits of her labour in terms of a record-breaking launch of a Fox hotel, and from there, the press release pivoted to the hotel’s virtues. Cleverly done, indeed.

But her denial of their relationship hit him hard in the solar plexus, so he drove with a sense of foreboding, all the way to her place and pulled up just around the corner. He walked quickly with his head bent, just in case there were paparazzi lingering; there weren’t.

He knocked when he got there, and waited, trying to work out what the hell he was going to say.

Louisa wrenched in the door, dressed in a pair of linen pants and a cotton shirt, with an anxious look on her features as she scanned behind him.

“What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.”

To show her silent agreement, she opened the door and gestured for him to come inside. She closed the door quickly and slid the lock in place.

“About our business relationship?” he asked, then shook his head in frustration, because he had no business going on the defensive.

“It was just easier to diffuse it,” she murmured, moving deeper into her apartment. “Would you like a coffee?”

He shook his head. “I’ve talked to Taylor.”

Louisa nodded.

“She leaked it.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I was pretty sure she had.”

“She’s finally talking to me, explaining how she feels. Why she feels the way she does.”

“I’m glad,” Louisa said, but slowly, carefully.

“She should never have done that. She was worried she was losing me.”

“That makes sense.”

“To a teenager, yes. I suppose it does.” He sighed. “It turns out, she’s known about her mom’s addictions for a while. She’s been dealing with that, on her own. Or worse, using her adolescent friends for guidance, instead of coming to me.”

“She’s a teenage girl,” Louisa said. “Talking to your friends about your problems goes with the territory.”

“Still, I wish?—,”

“You should have spoken to her first,” Louisa said, gently. “But I know you know that.”

He closed his eyes.

“You wanted to protect her, but it was always going to come out.”

He ground his teeth. “Yeah.”

“Is she okay?”

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He stared at Louisa, his heart squeezing then dropping. She was actually showing concern for Taylor in that moment? That was why he loved her. And he realized then that he did love her. Utterly and completely. It made this all the harder. “She’s—going to be. I’m going to make sure of it.” His voice was strangely thick. He cleared his throat. “I have to focus on that.”

Louisa’s throat shifted as she swallowed quickly. “Yeah.” The word was barely audible.

“I’m going to take her home this afternoon. To my parents,” he clarified. “We’ll probably stay there for the rest of the holidays.”

Louisa’s skin paled but she didn’t visibly react.

“I’ve fucked it all up,” he said, dragging a hand through his hair. “Everything. From the minute I left Amy, I’ve made one wrong decision after another. I need to start making right decisions.” And then, in a voice he barely recognized, “She’s my kid.”

Louisa’s eyes were suspiciously moist. “And you’re her dad. Her only dad. She needs you now.” She blinked away quickly. “Of course, you have to look after her.”

“I wish—I want?—,”

“It won’t work,” she said quietly. “You need the breathing space to concentrate on Taylor, and I want to keep a low profile. Nothing about us makes sense anymore.”

“That’s not true,” he disputed it immediately. “So much of us makes sense. If it was

six months down the track, then it would all be different.”

Her expression was one of skepticism. “Perhaps.” She lifted her shoulders. “But it’s now, and we’re here.” She bit into her lip and then said, in a voice that was clear and unemotional—regal. “I’ll miss you.”

His heart twisted. His gut rolled. He stared at her as though she’d just laid out a plan for his execution, except, hadn’t he done that? Wasn’t he the one who said that he needed to focus on Taylor?

“Listen, Louisa,” he took a step towards her, hating the distance between them, needing to get through to her.

But she shook her head quickly and took a step back. As though the distance was her salvation. “It’s okay,” she promised. “It was never meant to be for keeps, remember? We just forgot that, somewhere along the way.”

But he wanted it to be for keeps. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He just couldn’t see a way to make that happen. He had no way of knowing how long it would take him to reconnect with Taylor, nor to help her through this phase.

“I love you,” he said, swallowing roughly.

She closed her eyes and nodded once. Was that it? What did he expect? A matching declaration of love, while he was putting an end to this? It didn’t matter. He needed Louisa to know so that when she looked back on this, she understood what his decision was costing him.

“I’ll hand the rest of the campaign over to Stuart,” she said crisply, so he frowned because he wasn’t thinking about the business at all. “He knows most of the details.”

Noah crossed his arms. “You don’t have to quit.”

“We’re almost through anyway; they’ll call me if they need me, but I think going back into your office would just fuel the fire.”

“So, you’ll return to the agency?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes.”

“You have to understand?—,”

“That’s what really sucks, Noah. I do understand.” And then, she stepped forward, and forward again, until she was standing right in front of him. “I was borrowing you, but you’ll always be hers, and that’s the way it has to be. It’s how it should be. You’re a great dad.”

“I’ve done everything wrong.”

“You’ve loved her. You’ve kept her safe. You’ve always been guided by wanting her to be happy. Taylor will understand that, one day.” She lifted a hand to his cheek and his whole body sparked in response.

“And what about you, Louisa? What about us?”

Her throat shifted visibly as she swallowed, silence static around them as she searched for words. When she spoke, her voice was soft and husky. “I’ll always remember you—this—as one of the best times of my life. You brought the sun out from behind the clouds for me. That’s what I’ll remember.”

He cursed inwardly. She was way too fair, and kind, and gracious. She was his match, his other half. She was the air he breathed, and he had no idea how he’d go on



breathing without her in his life. But Taylor had made her feelings clear, and he had to prioritise her.

“I’m so sorry,” he muttered, kissing the top of her forehead. “I would do anything to change this.”

“I know.” She tilted her face up and caught his lips with hers. “It’s okay. It’s just how it has to be.” And she pulled away from him, an uneven smile on her beautiful face, that he didn’t even try to mirror. He didn’t know if he’d ever smile again.

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The second he left, Louisa pressed her back to the wall and slumped to the floor, control snapping, the tears coming freely now. She dropped her head forward and gave into the grief that had started to build inside of her from the moment she realized Taylor had gone to the press.

Because she'd joined the dots a hell of a lot faster than Noah had. The benefit of a little perspective and distance, she thought, sobbing into her palms. She hadn't known exactly why Taylor had gone to the media, but she knew that it was a move of desperation and that the teenager clearly needed her dad.

If Noah hadn't come here to say exactly that, Louisa would have ended it with him for exactly the same reason. She couldn't be with him if it was detrimental to Taylor. While the two were hardly friendly, Louisa was already predisposed to love the girl for the simple reason that she was Noah's child.

She sobbed again, feeling as though for the second time in a year, she'd lost a future that should have been hers. Except she'd never really wanted to marry Ares and become Queen. It had been an idea that had built almost without her consent, growing and suddenly becoming impossible to extricate herself from, as approval for her as his partner increased and it was all of a sudden taken as gospel that they'd marry. So, when she'd imagined her life as his wife, and the mother of his children, it had been because other people had foreshadowed that for her.

With Noah, it had all been so organic. She'd just loved being with him. He'd sparked something inside of her that had gone from ember to flame in a matter of days, and suddenly, she'd been warm and content all the time.

She'd imagined their lives, and Taylor had been a part of that, but she'd even started to hope for more—another baby, perhaps, a little brother or sister for Taylor. A rich, happy life with the man she truly, utterly loved.

I love you.

He'd said it, and the words had been like acid because they were everything she wanted to hear, but nothing she could accept. She loved him too, but it didn't change anything. There was no way for them to be together.

Sadness threatened to engulf her.

She pushed up carefully, then made her way to the sofa, where she lay down and stared at the wall, tears falling down her cheeks as the sun travelled through the sky and the day passed in a blur that Louisa barely registered.

She was alone, and devastated, and unlike last time, she didn't even have the energy to think about running away. She stayed on the sofa, bereft, and simply hoped that time would work some magic and eventually, she'd feel okay again.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"SHE'S COME A LONG way," Lucas commented, as Taylor trotted past them on the Arabian steed.

"Remember when she wouldn't even get on a pony?" Christopher chimed in.

"She was about five," Noah pointed out.

"No, she was older," Max corrected. "Maybe ten?"

“She used to be afraid of horses,” Noah said.

“What changed?”

“I have no idea,” Noah shrugged. “I think they did some horse riding on a school camp.”

“She’s a natural,” Winnie Fox, the family matriarch, said with pride as she came to stand beside the boys. “Just like her mother.”

Noah glanced at his mother with a grateful smile. Winnie might not have liked Amy, but she’d always been careful not to show that to Taylor. In fact, she went out of her way to bring up Amy’s good points, to speak about her with respect. And Amy had always been a great rider.

“How is Amy?” Max asked, glancing at Noah.

Noah grimaced, ashamed to say he hadn’t thought of his ex-wife much at all for days. His whole mind had been focused on Louisa, on the press release that would hit the internet any minute now, if it wasn’t already out there.

On how she’d cope with it. On how it would affect her. On how the journalists would report the story. His heart twisted in his chest.

“She’s going to call Tay later today. I’ll find out then.”

“She’s still in the centre?” Winnie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s good news. Who knows, maybe next year she really can come out and

join us for Christmas.”

Noah nodded. “Maybe.”

“And Louisa?” Max asked. Noah stiffened. Hearing her name spoken aloud was both a joy and a source of torture.

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“I’m not sure about that, either.” He took one last glance at Taylor then turned his back. “Excuse me. I’m going to grab something to eat.”

He walked with his long-legged stride across the bright orange dirt, kicking up plumes of dust as he went, away from the stables and towards the large, sprawling timber house. The wrap-around deck was shaded by the tin roof, and a porch swing hung a little to the left of the door. He kicked off his boots as he strode inside, the cool of the house an instant and welcome relief.

“Wait up.” Max followed behind. Noah didn’t slow down, but in the kitchen, Max caught him. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. What do you mean?”

“With you and Louisa?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Why isn’t she?”

“She didn’t want to come.”

“So, you’re still together?”

Noah closed his eyes on a wave of remorse. “No.”

Max rubbed a hand over his beard. “Because of Tay?”

“Because she needs me,” he said with a small shift of his head. “I’m okay with that.”

“Are you? And what about Louisa?”

“She understands.”

“What about Taylor?”

“Taylor doesn’t want Louisa in our lives.”

“Taylor’s a teenager.”

“But still a person, with her own wants and fears.”

“And you’re going to let those fears rule your life?”

“What would you do, in my position?”

“Fight for what I wanted,” Max said, without hesitation.

“Fight how? Fight whom? My kid? I can’t. I’m all she has, Max.”

“Bullshit. She has us. She has me, mum, Chris, and Lucas. And she has Amy, even though Amy can’t really be what she needs right now. She still loves her.”

A muscle throbbed in Noah’s jaw.

“I’m not saying you and Louisa have to move in together right away or get married or whatever. But you are allowed to date someone, even if your daughter doesn’t love the idea.”

“She’s not in a good place,” Noah disputed. “That has to be my focus. I have the rest of my life to...meet someone. This isn’t the time to be selfish.”

Max made a grunting sound that might have been agreement or might have been violent disagreement.

“What does that mean?” Noah asked.

“You’re the least selfish person I know, Noah.”

Noah braced his palms on the counter and stared at his brother.



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“You didn’t love Amy, but you married her, because you wanted to do what was right for her, and Taylor. You weretwenty years old, and you married someone who you know, and I know, got pregnant just so you wouldn’t break up with her.”

“Keep your voice down,” Noah cautioned, glancing towards the window.

“And you stayed married to her and tried to make a go of it. You showed up for her again and again, because you wanted Tay to have a proper family.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I have no idea. I’d love to think so, but honestly...I reckon I’m more selfish than you, by a country mile.”

“Wait until you hold your kid in your arms,” Noah said, shaking his head. “There is nothing you won’t do for your child. Nothing you won’t give up.”

“Sure, if the sacrifice was worth it, I guess.”

“You don’t think Taylor is worth it?”

“I don’t think walking away from Louisa is going to change a damned thing about your relationship with Taylor. Maybe in the beginning, like now, she’s happy because she clicked her fingers, and you jumped. But what about in a year’s time, when you’re still miserable and Louisa’s met someone else, and you realise you let the love of your life go? How do you think Taylor will feel when she wakes up and sees what you gave up for her?”

He squared his shoulders. “She’ll know how much I love her.”

“She knows that already.”

Noah ground his teeth and glanced towards the window.

“You love Louisa, right? You told me she’s the love of your life? I didn’t make that up?”

“I love her,” he admitted, remembering the words he’d spoken to his brother the day he’d arrived.

“Have you explained that to Taylor?”

“Taylor’s terrified of losing me. Explaining how much I love Louisa seems unnecessarily cruel.”

“You never learn, do you?” Max said, shaking his head sadly. “You’ve been shielding Tay from the truth all her life, presuming she doesn’t have what it takes to make an adult decision. How about you give it a try? Tell her how you feel, what you want, and just see what she says, man. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Noah stared at his brother with a creeping sense of wonderment. Of possibility. Because maybe Max was right? Maybe by packing up and walking away from Louisa, he’d been infantilizing Taylor yet again. He knew how she felt, but it didn’t necessarily follow that she would want him to leave Louisa.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said, snack forgotten as he prowled towards the door and turned back to his brother, frowning a little. “Thank you.”

“What are brothers for?”

Louisa's phone hadn't stopped buzzing for about three hours straight, so it was a relief when the battery finally died, and she could get some peace. A relief when she could close her eyes and not think about Moricosia and the nation's shock at Ares's announcement, not think about the press release the palace had issued on her behalf, wishing them well, not think about Noah, and Taylor or her family, so far away. Not think about how utterly alone she was, with no concept of where she wanted to be. And with whom she belonged.

For a brief few weeks, she'd felt that.

She'd felt every part of her lock into place and had known, beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was destined to be here, with Noah and Taylor. It didn't matter that it was going to be a bumpy ride, it just mattered that they were together.

But Noah had been right to put Taylor first. It was his only option. She got that. She just wished she could go back in time, to that day in his office, and say 'no' to the dinner invitation. She wished she'd never loved him, so the sting of losing him wouldn't have so much power.

The knocking at her door was the final straw. On Christmas Eve, seriously?

She'd had all her blinds drawn all day, because the press had been poking around, trying to get a photo however they could. Miserable bastards.

The door buzzer rang. "Go away," she shouted, proud of herself for avoiding a swear word, when one had been loaded on the tip of her tongue.

"It's me."

She sat up straight, staring straight ahead. "Noah?" She whispered, pressing her fingertips to her lips. She stood quickly, moving to a mirror. Her face was a mess.

Puffy eyed from crying, pink and blotchy. Her hair was worse. But it wasn't an option to leave him standing on the doorstep. Photographers were out there.

What was he thinking?

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With a groan, she practically ran to the front door, and, holding it so she was completely obstructed from view, opened it inwards. He stepped inside and she pushed it shut, wishing she'd had a few more minutes to tidy herself up, because he was looking at her in a way that showed he missed nothing.

“Louisa,” he said her name with a possessive heat, but then his voice softened. “How are you?”

She opened her mouth to respond that she was ‘fine’, only the word wouldn’t come out. Miserable, would be more accurate. She nodded in lieu of either.

“What’s happened?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

He jammed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I needed to see you.”

“Why?” She furrowed her brow in genuine confusion.

“The engagement announcement. Are you okay?”

She stared at him, barely computing. “It’s...I’m...It’s hardly a surprise,” she pointed out. “I knew it was coming.”

“Still, now everyone knows.”

“I don’t care about Ares and Sofia,” she said, then, with a grimace. “I mean, I care. I’m glad he’s happy, yada yada yada. But nothing they do can affect me.”

“Then this,” he moved towards her, swiping his thumb over her cheek, which was wet with tears. “is for me?”

She glanced down at the floor between them, not bothering to deny it.

“Louisa,” he groaned. “I came here the other day because I was so sick of making mistakes, and I just wanted to do the right thing, only, fool that I apparently am, I ended up making the biggest mistake of my life.”

She couldn’t look at him. Her heart was stretching with a sort of impossible hope, but Louisa refused to give it room. She wouldn’t hope for what just wasn’t possible.

“I love you,” he said again, the words a quiet rumble. “And if you love me, then I don’t care what happens next, except that whatever it is, we face it together.”

She jerked her face to his, shaking her head in one motion. “But Taylor?—,”

“I’ve talked to Taylor. A lot.” He caught Louisa’s face in his hands, looking at her with so much love it took her breath away. “She’s sorry for what she did. The more we talked, the more she opened up, the more she started to seem recognizable to me. Like herself again. We can’t rush it with her, but she’s not going to stand in the way for us.”

Louisa’s heart dropped. She shook her head. “I can’t do this, though, Noah. I can’t be the reason that your relationship with her suffers.”

“You will never be that. My problems with Taylor go way back, and they’re mine to fix. I haven’t been honest with her, but all that stops now.”

“What did you tell her, about me?”

“That I love you. That I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I gave her two options. Either you and I keep doing what we were doing, spending time here in your apartment until Taylor moves away to university and doesn’t care so much what her dad does. Or she opens herself up properly to the idea of you being in our lives and starts to see that her heart has room for Amy and you.”

Louisa felt her knees go weak.

“I’m not saying she’s going to love you, or that it’s going to happen overnight, but she spoke to my mother—who is, as you know, my stepmother—and I think it helped her understand that families can be complex but still kind of wonderful.”

Louisa closed her eyes on a wave of emotion.

“Like you and Ares. You’re great friends, and to some people that might seem strange, but I get it. You spent a lot of time together, and he’s someone you want in your life, that you care about. Family.”

“Family,” she repeated softly.

“And you’re my family. Whether Taylor accepts that or not, you’re my other half. I don’t want to run from that. I want to run towards it, and I want to fight for this.”

“Oh, Noah,” she said, shaking her head, blinking up at him through a fog of surprise and wonder. “I don’t know?—,”

“Yes, you do,” and he smiled one of those dazzling smiles that made it seem as if the world was full of glitter. “Look at me and tell me even a part of you doubts that this is the right path for us?”

She bit into her lip.

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“Tell me that you want to spend even one more day away from me?”

She shook her head, the thought anathema now.

“That’s what I hoped.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “Well, my darling, beautiful Louisa, how would you feel about seeing some of that Australian outback?”

She stared at him. “Now?”

“Well, I mean, my mother’s made a bed up for you, so...”

“At your request?”

“Actually, this was Taylor’s suggestion,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I told her about your road trip idea, and she agreed. So, if it’s still okay with you, I thought we could spend tomorrow with my family, then the day after Christmas, we’ll start driving back to Sydney.”

“Taylor agreed to that?”

“As long as she gets to choose the music. She says she owes it to you to try.” He stroked her cheek. “She feels pretty shitty about what she did.”

“I don’t want her to feel bad.”

“I’m glad she does. It shows me her moral compass is still alive and ticking.”



Louisa expelled a soft breath and lifted up onto the tips of her toes. “I love you,” she said, realizing she hadn’t actually said those words to him, and how wonderful they felt to say now. “And I always, always will.”

“Well, that’s a huge relief,” he grinned. “Because I’ve built a whole lot of plans around our future together, so I’m glad to know you’re a willing participant in that.”

“Very, very willing,” she promised. And then, “Do we have to leave right away?”

His eyes probed hers, and his grin was teasing. “We can wait a while. What did you have in mind?”

“A private catch-up,” she said with a firm nod. “Before I meet your whole family.”

“A private catch-up sounds just perfect.” And he lifted her up and carried her through her apartment, towards the bedroom. The same bedroom where this had all started, only this time, when they made love, they knew that was what they were doing: loving one another, worshipping each other, body and soul, and that they would do so for all time.

In the end, they stayed on the property for five days. Louisa adored the outback, and Noah’s family adored her.

By the end of the trip, Taylor seemed to have genuinely warmed to her—something neither of them had seen coming. But they’d video-called Amy a couple of times, and she seemed to be doing well, and there was something about having everything out in the open that was very healing. Not just for Taylor, but for Noah, too. He realized that he’d been treating Taylor like the little girl he often thought of her as, but it was much more fun to have her as someone who was on the brink of adulthood.

Louisa seemed to instinctively understand how to be around Taylor. She was warm

and kind without being condescending, loving, and patient without ever seeming to want to take over the role of mother. The more Noah saw of Louisa—whether that was her talking to his family, or spending time with Taylor—the bigger his love for her felt.

As the sun was setting on their last day in the outback, Louisa and Taylor went for a walk to say goodbye to the horses—they'd bonded over a love of riding, and a healthy competition, too.

"You know, I know Dad told you how sorry I am, about the, erm, restaurant thing," Taylor began, mumbling a little out of embarrassment.

"You don't need to apologise."

"I just wanted to explain, so you know it won't happen again. Like, ever. And not just because Dad would kill me."

Louisa concealed her smile.

"I was so selfish that night. I was just so angry. So worried about Mom and angry at Dad for not talking to me about her, and I just took it all out on you."

"That's completely understandable."

"No, it's not," she said with a shake of her head. "Because the thing is, part of what I have felt so bad about since we left the States was how unhappy Dad is. I have felt like this huge burden to him, because he focuses so much of his time and energy on me—way more than the other parents do their kids. He's at every netball training and game, he comes to debates, he brings me coffee, he's just been trying so hard to be so perfect that I felt bad about it. But then, he met you, and he told me how happy he was, and instead of being relieved that he was finally doing something for himself,

looking after himself, I was...jealous.” She shrugged. “It was never about you. I was so rude to you...”

“Hey,” Louisa stopped walking and turned to face her. “Let me tell you something, and I’m just going to say it once, okay? From the very beginning, your dad told me about you and told me you were the most important person in his world. That’s never going to change. He loves me, and I love him, but your relationship with him is totally unique, and I never, ever want to infringe on that.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Taylor insisted. “You’re not. You and Dad are your own thing and seeing how happy he is with you...it makes me happy. I’m really glad he met you.”

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Louisa's brows lifted upwards, and her eyes stung with the threat of tears.

"He told me you make him feel like he's walking on air," she said, then laughed. "But don't judge him for being cheesy. He's a boomer."

"He's not a boomer," Louisa corrected with a laugh of her own. "And I happen to like cheesy, especially when it's also impossibly sweet."

Taylor stood there awkwardly for a minute. "I guess I just wanted you to know that if you guys...like whatever you decide...I'm okay with it. Like, if you were to move in or whatever. Or get married." She shrugged.

Louisa's heart twisted. "We're going to take it slow, for everyone's sake," she promised. "But thank you for saying that. One day, when we're all ready, maybe that's what will happen."

And Louisa meant it. She knew that if it were just up to her and Noah, they'd have been married within a month. But Taylor was a huge part of the picture, and despite having made inroads during their outback holiday, Louisa was going to give the teen time to fully adjust.

So, they started slowly. A few dinners a week at Noah and Taylor's, then, some afternoons on the weekends Louisa took Taylor shopping with her, or to a movie. When Louisa's family came to visit, Noah installed them in a Fox penthouse and they spent several days all together out on Noah's yacht in the harbour.

Grace and Taylor bonded instantly, and by the end of the trip, Taylor was calling

Grace 'AG' for Aunty Grace.

And while they were carefully taking the steps towards their future, to everyone's delight, Amy stayed in rehab. Not for a month, not for three months but for six life changing months, and in that time, she seemed to find an inner peace that Noah said had been missing for a long time. By the time the Australian winter rolled around, Amy was out of rehab and planning a visit to Australia, which Noah and Louisa were wholeheartedly supporting.

When Amy visited, she stayed with Noah and Taylor, and it wasn't remotely weird for Louisa. She was happy for Taylor to have some time with her parents under the same roof, and even happier that she kept texting Louisa and inviting her over. Louisa gave them some space though.

After the visit, it was Taylor who approached Louisa, when she was cooking the eggplant and rice dish in Noah's kitchen.

"I really missed you, these last few weeks," she said, lifting one shoulder, flushing to the roots of her hair.

Louisa hid her surprise, but only just. "I missed you too." And she had. Strangely, she hadn't been at all jealous of Noah spending time with his ex, but she'd felt a little strange to think of Taylor with her mother. Silly, unjustifiable feelings, but she'd felt them anyway.

"But it was nice, having a third person in the house. It was louder. Warmer." She glanced up at Louisa, clearly nervous.

"What are you saying, Tay?"

"I just...It seems so dumb for you to be halfway across the city when we're here. Why can't you just move in already?"

Tears had clogged Louisa's throat, making it hard to speak, and when Noah strolled in a minute later, Taylor and Louisa were hugging, both crying. He stared at them, totally perplexed.

The following Christmas was completely different. Louisa's parents and sister came back from Moricosia, and all of them headed out to the farm to spend the Christmas break with Noah's family. Amy came too, still doing well, writing a memoir and filming a documentary for a wildlife preservation fund.

Louisa couldn't have imagined that things would turn out so well, and yet, as she sat beneath the starlit sky—so bright because they were in the middle of nowhere and the stars had no light pollution to contend with—and Noah wrapped his arm around her shoulders and held her tight, she wondered if that was true.

She'd left Ares without any idea what she was going to do, only she'd had a sneaking suspicion that there had to be something better for her. Something more right. It had almost been as if fate had been pushing her towards Noah, and this big, blended, happy family.

Her heart was full.

On that same Christmas, on a romantic picnic out on the land, with just the two of them and the night birds for company, Noah finally asked Louisa the question that had burning a hole in his mind for twelve full months.

"Not a single day goes by without me thanking God for bringing you to me. I never dreamed I would meet someone like you. I no longer think in terms of myself, but always, and forever, of us. You have already given me so much, but I wonder if you'd consider giving me what I want most in the world and agree to be my wife?"

She had agreed, and when they returned to the homestead later that night, they were able to celebrate with all their dearest, most cherished loved ones.

The wedding was a beautiful, intimate affair three months later, at the Sydney Fox hotel, and unbeknownst to either, there was a hitch-hiker on board—a little baby Fox, who would grace them by the following Christmas. They named her Holly, because Christmas seemed so pivotal to their relationship, and she was the apple of all of their eyes—particularly big sister Taylor, who almost put off going away to university because she couldn't bear to be parted from the infant.

But a prestigious spot at a Moricosian university was hard to resist, and so off Taylor went, excited to learn about her new 'heritage', as she liked to joke. She would be spending time with Louisa's family, in between term times, and it gave Noah and Louisa even more reason to go back to Europe regularly.

It was, in every sense of the words, the happiest ending any couple could ever imagine, and they never, ever forgot to be grateful for that.

THE END