

Empire of Desire

Lily Rae

EMPIRE OF DESIRE

She's my one-night stand who vanished without a trace.

Now she's my assistant.

And I'm supposed to pretend we're strangers.

But I don't do rules.

I break them.

Savannah Bishop is fire in a tailored dress.

Smart mouth. Sharp stare. A laugh that hides too much.

She runs my life like she owns it.

Like she owns me.

But she flinches when I get too close.

And there's something in her eyes she doesn't want me to see.

She's hiding something.

And if I uncover it, the fallout won't just wreck the project—

It'll wreck me.

Because the deeper I fall, the more I want to protect her—

Even if she's the one holding the knife.

She's in my world now.

And when the truth comes out.

I'll still want her.

Even if it breaks me.

Empire of Desire

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Chapter One

Savannah

I need to stop checking my phone.

Three more texts from Tessa. Each one is more urgent than the last.

Where are you?

Are you okay?

At least tell me you're alive.

The bourbon burns a path down my throat. One more swallow and the glass is empty. Again. I set it down harder than necessary, the sharp clink drawing glances from across the bar.

I don't care.

Forty-eight hours ago, I had a plan. A career. A future.

Now all I have is a half-empty bank account and the number of a bankruptcy lawyer tucked in my wallet.

My phone buzzes again. I flip it face-down on the polished bar top.

The Regent Hotel rooftop stretches around me, all sleek

glass and muted lighting. Manhattan glitters beyond, a tapestry of lights too bright, too alive. I'd come here seeking anonymity, choosing the most expensive hotel bar I could find—a place where people with real money wouldn't look twice at a woman drinking alone. But money can't buy invisibility.

"Another?" The bartender slides a coaster toward me.

I shouldn't. I really shouldn't.

"Please."

My voice sounds steady, at least. Small victories.

He pours with practiced precision. Three fingers. No ice. Just how I'd ordered the first two.

"Put it on my tab."

The voice comes from my left. Deep. Confident. The kind that expects to be obeyed.

I don't turn. "I pay my own way."

"Admirable." A pause. "Unnecessary, but admirable."

Now I look. Big mistake.

He's beautiful in that dangerous way only truly arrogant men can pull off. Dark hair, just disheveled enough to suggest either a board meeting or a bedroom. Sharp jawline. Sharper eyes. The kind of mouth that knows exactly what it's capable of.

"Not interested." I take a deliberate sip, staring straight ahead.

He laughs. The sound slides over my skin like warm honey.

"In the drink or the company?"

"Both."

Another lie. The bourbon is excellent.

He claims the stool beside mine, uninvited. His suit costs more than my rent, custom-tailored to fit broad shoul-

ders and a lean waist. His watch alone could probably cover Mama's mortgage for a year.

"Rough day?" He signals the bartender without looking away from me.

"Rough life."

His smile shifts, becomes something more genuine. "Now that sounds like a story worth hearing."

"Not one worth telling."

His drink arrives—amber liquid, pristine ice cube. He raises it toward mine. "To bad days and the nights that make us forget them."

I don't toast. But I don't move away either.

"Silent treatment? Fair enough." He takes a slow sip. "You're not from here."

It's not a question.

"What gave me away?"

"You're watching the city like it's both a miracle and a threat."

Something about his assessment sends a shiver down my spine. Too accurate. Too perceptive.

"Born and raised in Virginia," I admit, then immediately wonder why I'm telling him anything at all.

"Small town?"

"The smallest."

He nods, as though confirming a theory. "Came to the big city with big dreams?"

"Unoriginal story."

"Most good ones are." He angles toward me, one elbow on the bar. "The trick is in the execution."

The way he studies me should make me uncomfortable. Instead, it feels like being seen. Really seen, for the first time in months.

“And what’s your unoriginal story?” I ask, surprising myself by continuing the conversation.

“Born into money. Expected to make more of it.” He shrugs. “Currently avoiding both expectations and family.”

“Hence the hotel bar?”

“Hence the hotel bar.” He clinks his glass against mine. This time, I let him. “Though I wasn’t planning on drinking alone tonight.”

“You’re not drinking alone now.”

His eyes darken, catching the meaning behind my words. “No. I’m not.”

We drink in silence for a moment. The city pulses beyond the glass walls. Sixty floors below, lives continue. Bills stack up. Flower shops foreclose. Mothers get sick. Dreams die.

Up here, none of that exists. Just expensive liquor and a man whose gaze burns hotter than the bourbon.

“Your phone’s been vibrating for the last ten minutes,” he observes.

“I’m aware.”

“Someone’s worried about you.”

“Someone’s always worried about me.” I drain half my glass. “It’s exhausting.”

“Being worried about?”

“Being responsible.” The word tastes bitter. “Being the one who has to make everything okay when it’s clearly not.”

His expression shifts. Something flickers behind those eyes—recognition, maybe.

“I know something about that.”

“Do you?” I can’t keep the skepticism from my voice.

“Different tax bracket, same expectations.” He finishes his drink. “Family legacy. Company to run. Reputation to maintain.”

“Poor little rich boy.”

He laughs again, and damn if the sound doesn’t curl around my spine.

“Touché.”

The bartender appears with fresh drinks. This time, I don’t protest when my companion pays.

“So what brought you to the most expensive bar in Midtown to drink alone?” he asks.

“Who says I’m drinking alone?”

His smile turns predatory. “You were when I arrived.”

“Maybe I was waiting.”

“Were you?”

Our eyes lock. The air between us thickens, charged with something dangerous. Something inevitable.

“No,” I admit. “I wasn’t waiting for anyone.”

“Until now.”

It’s not a question.

I should leave. I should pay my tab, grab my purse, and walk out. Go back to my cramped apartment, stare at my dwindling bank account, and figure out how to tell Mama that I can’t help her this month.

Instead, I take another drink and ask, “What makes you think I’m waiting for you now?”

“The way you keep looking at my mouth.”

My cheeks heat. Caught.

“That’s presumptuous.”

“It’s accurate.”

His fingers brush mine as he reaches for his glass. The touch is deliberate. Electric. I don’t pull away.

“Bad day?” I echo his earlier question.

“Bad year.” His gaze travels from my eyes to my lips, then lower. “Though it’s improving rapidly.”

I should feel objectified. Used. Instead, I feel powerful. Wanted. Things I haven't felt in a very long time.

"I bet you can't handle me," I say, the words escaping before I can stop them.

His smile is sin incarnate. "Sweetheart, handling you would be a privilege."

The tension between us pulls taut. One of us has to break it.

I lean in.

"My room is on the sixtieth floor," he murmurs against my ear, his breath warm on my skin.

"I haven't said yes."

"You haven't said no." His hand hovers near mine, not quite touching. "Say the word and I'll walk away."

I hesitate. This isn't me. I don't do this—hotel bars, strange men, one-night stands. I'm the responsible one. The planner. The girl who calls her Mama every Sunday and works double shifts to help pay for medications.

But tonight, responsibility feels like a noose. And this man, with his expensive suit and knowing smile, offers escape.

Just once, I want to be someone else. Someone reckless. Someone free.

"Yes."

His hand closes around mine, warm and sure.

"Last chance to change your mind."

"I won't."

The walk to the elevator passes in a blur. The rooftop bar. The hushed hallway. The private elevator that requires a key card. I notice details in fragments—the scent of his cologne, spice and citrus and something darker. The brush of his sleeve against mine. The weight of his gaze.

Empire of Desire

We don't touch in the elevator. Don't speak. The tension coils tighter with each ascending floor.

57...58...59...

I can't breathe. Can't think. The air between us feels combustible.

He stands with his back against one wall, watching me. Patient. Predatory.

The elevator stops. The doors slide open.

I move first, stepping into the hallway. He follows close enough that I feel his heat without touching.

Room 6021. The key card slides home with a soft click.

The door closes behind us. And then—finally, finally—he touches me.

His hands frame my face, thumbs tracing my cheekbones with surprising gentleness. Our eyes lock. A silent question.

I answer by rising on my toes and pressing my mouth to his. The kiss detonates whatever restraint remained between us.

His hands are everywhere—my hair, my waist, sliding beneath my dress. Mine aren't any more controlled, tugging at his tie, fumbling with buttons, desperate for skin.

We collide against the wall, the dresser, and finally the bed. Clothes disappear in frantic yanks and whispered curses. His mouth traces a burning path down my neck, across my collarbone, lower. I gasp, drag my nails down his back, arching into his touch.

"Tell me what you want," he demands, voice rough.

What I want is to forget. To escape. To feel something other than panic and grief and the crushing weight of failure.

"You," I whisper. "Just you."

His hands slide down my body, leaving fire in their

wake. He's methodical, deliberate, as if he's trying to map out every inch of my body.

"You're fucking perfect," he murmurs against my throat, teeth grazing the sensitive skin.

I arch into him, desperate for more contact. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging just hard enough to make him groan. The sound vibrates through me, settling low in my belly.

"Less talking," I breathe. "More of this."

He laughs against my skin, the warmth of his breath sending goosebumps racing across my flesh. "Demanding. I like it."

His mouth finds mine again, hungrier this time. There's nothing gentle about the way he kisses me now—all tongue and teeth and need. I match his intensity, biting his lower lip, swallowing his moan.

When his fingers brush the lace edge of my panties, I shiver.

"Cold?" he asks, voice rough.

"The opposite."

His smile is wicked. "Good."

He slides down my body, trailing kisses over my collarbone, between my breasts, across my stomach. Each touch is deliberate, calculated to drive me crazy. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he pauses, looking up at me with those intense eyes.

"I want to taste you," he says. "Tell me you want that too."

"Yes," I whisper, beyond pride or hesitation. "God, yes."

He hooks his fingers in my panties, dragging them down my legs with agonizing slowness. The cool air hits my heated skin, making me gasp.

“Fuck,” he breathes, staring at me like I’m something precious. “Look at you.”

Instead of feeling vulnerable, I revel in the way he’s reacting to me. I spread my legs wider, an invitation.

He doesn’t make me wait. His mouth is on me, hot and insistent. The first stroke of his tongue has me arching off the bed, a cry tearing from my throat.

“That’s it,” he murmurs against me. “Let me hear you.”

His tongue circles my clit, applying just enough pressure to make my thighs tremble. One hand grips my hip, holding me in place as I try to squirm closer. The other slides up my body to cup my breast, thumb brushing over my nipple.

“Oh God,” I gasp, my hands fisting in the sheets. “Don’t stop.”

He hums against me, the vibration sending shockwaves through my body. Then he slides a finger inside me, curling it forward as his tongue continues its relentless assault.

“You’re so fucking wet for me,” he growls.

I can’t respond. Can’t think. Can only feel as he adds a second finger, stretching me, preparing me. His mouth never leaves my clit, sucking and licking with devastating precision.

The pressure builds, a coiling tension that threatens to snap. I’m close—so close—but I want more. Want him.

“Please,” I manage, tugging at his hair. “I need you inside me.”

He lifts his head, lips glistening. “Not yet. I want to feel you come on my tongue first.”

Before I can protest, he’s back, his fingers pumping faster, his tongue flicking harder. The dual sensation is too much. My back bows, thighs clamping around his head as the orgasm crashes through me.

“That’s it,” he coaxes, working me through it. “Let go for me.”

I shatter, a broken cry on my lips. He doesn’t stop, drawing out every aftershock until I’m trembling, oversensitive, pushing at his shoulders.

He rises, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes are dark with desire, pupils blown wide. I watch, still catching my breath, as he strips off his remaining clothes.

His cock springs free, hard and thick. My mouth waters at the sight.

“My turn,” I whisper, pushing him onto his back.

I straddle him, feeling his hardness press against my still-sensitive pussy. He groans, hands gripping my hips.

“Condom,” he manages, nodding toward the nightstand.

I reach over, fumbling in the drawer until I find a foil packet. Tearing it open with my teeth, I roll it down his length, enjoying the way his breath hitches when I touch him.

“Fuck, your hands,” he groans.

I position myself above him, teasing us both by sliding my wetness along his shaft. His eyes roll back, fingers digging into my thighs.

“Stop teasing,” he growls.

“Make me.”

The challenge lights a fire in his eyes. In one swift move, he flips us over, pinning me beneath him. His cock presses against my entrance, not quite pushing in.

“Tell me you want this,” he demands, voice strained with restraint.

“I want you,” I breathe, wrapping my legs around his waist. “All of you. Now.”

He enters me in one long, smooth thrust. We both cry out—me at the delicious stretch, him at the tight heat.

“Fuck,” he hisses, forehead pressed to mine. “You feel incredible.”

He starts to move, setting a rhythm that has me clawing at his back. Each thrust drives deeper, hitting spots that make my vision blur. I lift my hips to meet him, taking him deeper still.

“Yes,” I gasp. “Right there. Don’t stop.”

His pace increases, control slipping. One hand slides between us, thumb circling my clit in time with his thrusts. The dual stimulation is overwhelming.

“Come for me again,” he demands. “I want to feel you come around my cock.”

His words push me closer to the edge. I’m almost there, almost—

“Look at me,” he orders.

I open my eyes, meeting his gaze. The intensity I find there—desire, yes, but something more, something deeper—sends me spiraling over the edge.

My walls clench around him as I come, even harder than the first time. He groans, movements becoming erratic as he chases his own release.

“I’m close,” he pants. “So fucking close.”

I tighten my legs around him, urging him deeper. “Come for me.”

He thrusts once, twice more, then stiffens, a guttural moan tearing from his throat as he pulses inside me. I hold him close, feeling the rapid beat of his heart against mine.

For a moment, we stay like that, connected, breathing hard. His weight on me feels right, grounding. I run my fingers through his sweat-dampened hair, suddenly reluctant to let this moment end.

He lifts his head, studying my face with those piercing eyes. Something passes between us, something that makes my chest tighten with an emotion I'm not ready to name.

Then he kisses me, soft and slow, and I taste myself on his tongue. It's strangely intimate, this gentle aftermath following such frenzied passion.

"Stay," he murmurs against my lips.

Something cracks open inside me, a tiny fissure that threatens to become a chasm if I don't leave now.

I wait until his breathing fully steadies, then carefully extract myself from his arms. He stirs but doesn't wake.

In the bathroom, I stare at my reflection. Flushed cheeks. Swollen lips. Hair a wild tangle. I look like a different person—someone careless, someone free.

I dress quickly, quietly. I find a hotel notepad on the desk and consider what to write. What do you say to a stranger who just unmade you?

In the end, I keep it simple.

Thank you for the escape. Take care of yourself.

I leave the note on the pillow beside him and allow myself one last look at his face, softer in sleep. Younger. The arrogance is smoothed away, revealing something almost vulnerable.

For a heartbeat, I waver. Stay or go?

My phone buzzes in my purse. Reality calling.

I go.

The hotel lobby is nearly empty at this hour. The night doorman nods as I pass. Outside, the city air hits me like a slap, cooler now, carrying the promise of dawn.

I walk half a block before hailing a cab, giving the driver my address in Brooklyn. As we pull away, I resist the urge to look back at the Imperial's gleaming façade. At the sixtieth

Empire of Desire

floor where a stranger sleeps in tangled sheets that still hold my scent.

I don't know his name. He doesn't know mine. Perfect strangers for one perfect night.

It should end here. Clean. Complete. A momentary escape from reality, nothing more.

But as the cab winds through Manhattan's streets, I can't shake the feeling that I've just made the kind of mistake that follows you home.

I left without looking back. But some sins don't stay buried. And some kisses? They don't ever let you go.

Chapter Two

Savannah

3 MONTHS LATER

My alarm never rings anymore. I just wake up, like clockwork, 6:15 a.m. with the weight of another day pressing on my chest before I even open my eyes.

Some days I lie there and count ceiling cracks. Today there are seventeen. Yesterday there were sixteen. The apartment is falling apart like everything else in my life.

The space heater clicks off, plunging the studio into silence. My breath fogs in the morning air. Another month, another notice from the landlord about the building's "temporary heating issues." Three months isn't temporary. It's negligence with a prettier name.

My phone buzzes, skittering across the nightstand like it's as desperate to escape this place as I am. The screen illuminates with the name I'd been avoiding. *Miss Loretta's Diner*.

I let it ring. Four times. Five. Six. Voicemail.

"Savannah, honey, it's Loretta. I know it's your day off,

but Margie called in sick again.” A pause. A sigh. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate. Call me back.”

I press my palms against my eyes until I see stars.
Breathe. Just breathe.

My feet hit the cold floor. The apartment is small enough that I can see everything from my bed: the kitchenette with its dripping faucet, the tiny bathroom with the door that doesn’t quite close, the fold-out table that serves as both dining room and office.

My home. My prison.

The cracked mirror above the bathroom sink reveals what I already know. Dark circles under bloodshot eyes. Hair pulled back in a messy bun that’s more function than style. Chipped polish on bitten nails. I look like what I am: a woman hanging on by her fingernails.

Coffee first. Always coffee.

The machine sputters and hisses, filling the apartment with the only comfort I can consistently afford. I cradle the chipped mug between my palms, letting the warmth seep into my bones while I gather courage for the call I make every morning.

Mama picks up on the third ring.

“Bishop Blooms, where every petal tells a story!”

Her voice is sunshine wrapped in honey, the Virginia twang stronger in the morning. For a moment, I’m five years old again, watching her arrange wildflowers while humming church hymns.

“Morning, Mama.”

“Savannah!” The joy in her voice makes my chest ache. “I was just thinking about you, sugar. The magnolias are in bloom early this year. Remember how you used to climb that tree in the Hendersons’ yard to steal flowers for your hair?”

I smile despite myself. “And Mrs. Henderson would chase me with her garden shears, threatening to cut my pigtails off.”

“Lord, that woman had a temper.” Mama laughs, the sound soft and familiar. “How’s the big city treating my girl today?”

The lie comes easily. “Good. Busy. You know how it is.”

“And those auditions? Any callbacks?”

My stomach twists. “Not yet. But something will come through.”

The silence stretches between us, filled with things we don’t say. The flower shop’s mortgage. My failed dance career. The fact that I’m working two jobs and can barely keep my own lights on, much less save her dream.

“How’s the shop, Mama?”

“Oh, you know.” Her voice brightens artificially. “Slow season, that’s all. But wedding bookings are picking up for summer.”

Another lie. There is no slow season in a town with three funeral homes and a steady stream of church weddings. If Bishop Blooms is quiet, it’s because people are going elsewhere.

Like Bloom & Stem, the franchise that opened across the street last year with their lower prices and flashy website.

“Did you try that social media thing I mentioned?” I ask, knowing the answer.

“Lord, Savannah, I can barely work my flip phone. And nobody wants to see an old lady like me on the Facebook.”

I close my eyes, tamping down frustration.

“It’s just Facebook, Mama. And people would love to see your arrangements. They’re beautiful.”

“You always were my biggest cheerleader.” She

pauses, and I hear what she doesn't say. *But cheerleading doesn't pay bills.* "We're okay, sugar. God always provides."

My throat tightens. "I'm sending money this week."

"No, baby. You keep that for your dance classes. You're going to make it big, and then you can buy your Mama all the flowers in Manhattan."

Dance classes... I haven't taken a class in eight months. Not since I had to choose between rent and dreams.

"I love you, Mama."

"Love you more, peach blossom."

I hang up and stare at the screen, throat burning with unshed tears. The GoFundMe app icon sits in the corner, mocking me. Three months ago, I'd created the page in desperation—*Save Bishop Blooms: A Small-Town Flower Shop Fighting to Survive.*

I'd written about Mama's thirty years of service, about how she'd arranged flowers for every birth, wedding, and funeral in town. How she'd never turned away a grieving family who couldn't afford a proper arrangement.

The initial response had been heartwarming. Friends, former classmates, even a few strangers had pitched in. But \$2,436 barely made a dent in the \$25,000 mortgage debt. And now the donations have dried up entirely.

I tap the app without hope, more habit than anything else. The screen loads. And then my world stops.

\$27,436.00.

I blink. Refresh the page.

\$27,436.00.

That's... that's not right. That's... My finger trembles as I scroll to recent donations.

Anonymous: \$25,000

10 hours ago

The mug slips from my hand, shattering against the floor. Coffee splashes my bare legs, but I barely feel it.

Twenty-five thousand dollars. Anonymous. No message. No name. Just paid in full.

My knees give out, and I sink to the floor, coffee soaking into my sweatpants. The tears come without warning—great, heaving sobs that rack my body. It's not joy. It's *release*. Like something inside me has finally broken open, letting all the pressure escape at once.

Mama's shop is saved.

But who...? Who would do this?

I grab my phone again, fingers shaking so badly I can barely pull up her contact. But then I stop, thumb hovering over the call button.

No. Not yet.

I need to understand what's happening first. Anonymous donors don't just appear out of nowhere with exactly the amount needed. In my experience, the universe doesn't work that way. The universe takes. It doesn't give.

I wipe my face with the back of my hand and pull myself up from the floor. The broken mug can wait. I need answers.

Google offers little comfort: "*Anonymous donors often prefer privacy for tax purposes,*" "*Wealthy philanthropists sometimes make targeted donations to causes that move them,*" "*Crowdfunding platforms protect donor identities.*" Nothing about the cosmic coincidence of someone dropping *exactly* what you need into your lap overnight.

I pace the small apartment, five steps one way, five steps back, a caged animal trying to make sense of unexpected freedom.

What if it's a mistake? What if they take it back?

What if it isn't?

My laptop dings with an incoming email. Probably another rejection from yesterday's audition. hey never take longer than twenty-four hours to crush your dreams.

I click without looking, ready to add it to the folder labeled "Growth Opportunities" (*Tessa's idea—more optimistic than my original "Soul-Crushing Rejections"*).

From: recruitment@alderidge-hathaway.com

Subject: Offer Letter – Alderidge-Hathaway Global

I freeze.

Alderidge-Hathaway. The corporate giant whose name graces half the skyscrapers in Manhattan. The merger that dominated business news for months.

I never applied there. I'd never even considered it. Corporate America was Plan Z, the thing I'd do when all else failed.

With shaking hands, I open the email.

Dear Ms. Bishop,

Based on your impressive qualifications, Alderidge-Hathaway Global is pleased to offer you the position of Executive Assistant at our New York headquarters. This full-time position offers a competitive salary of \$75,000 annually, with comprehensive benefits including health, dental, and vision insurance, effective immediately upon start date.

Your skills and experience make you an ideal candidate for our team, and we are confident you will be a valuable asset to our organization.

Please find the attached offer letter and employment contract. To accept this position, please sign and return the documents by close of business today.

We look forward to welcoming you to Alderidge-Hathaway Global.

Sincerely,

Human Resources Department

Alderidge-Hathaway Global

Seventy-five thousand dollars... I stare at the number until it blurs. That's more than triple what I make now between the diner and my weekend retail job.

But I never applied. And there's no mention of who I'd be working for.

My heart pounds against my ribs. This can't be real. This can't be happening.

First the donation. Now this.

I grab my phone again, this time pulling up Tessa's contact.

Someone's fucking with me. Anonymous donation? Dream job offer? This feels like a setup.

I delete the draft before sending. Tessa would tell me I'm paranoid. That sometimes good things happen. That I should grab this chance and run with it.

But she doesn't understand what it's like to have the floor ripped out from under you just when you think you're standing on solid ground.

I've been here before. Given my everything to people who promised the world and delivered nothing but heartbreak.

My director at the conservatory: *"You have star quality, Savannah. Just stay after hours for some... private coaching."* The boyfriend who said he loved me, then disappeared with my savings and half my belongings. The "opportunity" that turned out to be an exploitation trap for desperate dancers.

I know better now. I know nothing comes without strings.

But \$75,000... Mama's shop saved... Security...

My thumb hovers over the attachment. The contract downloads quickly. Twelve pages of corporate legalese that might as well be written in Sanskrit. I skim the highlights:

start date (tomorrow), probation period (ninety days), confidentiality clauses, termination policies.

Nothing overtly suspicious. Nothing that explains why me.

I check the clock: 10:37 a.m. Close of business is hours away. I have time to think. To research. To find the catch.

I spend the next hour Googling Alderidge-Hathaway. The results are overwhelming: one of the largest mergers in recent history, combining Alderidge Global's luxury developments with Hathaway Industries' sustainable technology. The press coverage is mostly positive—innovation, forward thinking, a powerhouse of modern business.

But there are whispers, too. Articles about cut-throat tactics. Forum posts about disappeared competitors. Nothing concrete, just the kind of rumors that swirl around the ultra-wealthy like expensive cologne.

My phone buzzes again. It's Loretta again. I silence it. Whatever decision I make about this job offer, I won't be picking up extra shifts today.

I stare at the contract again, cursor hovering over the signature line. This is insane. I should be asking questions. Demanding to know who's hiring me and why.

But what if asking questions makes the offer disappear? What if this really is just... luck?

God always provides, Mama always says.

I've never believed that. Not really. In my experience, God's too busy to bother with broken dancers living in Brooklyn shoeboxes.

But someone, somewhere, decided to help me. Decided to drop a miracle in my lap when I needed it most. I should be grateful. I should be overjoyed. Instead, I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something dangerous. Like I'm about to step off a cliff with no idea what waits below.

Lily Rae

My laptop dings with another email.

From: recruitment@alderidge-hathaway.com

Subject: Re: Offer Letter – Alderidge-Hathaway Global

Ms. Bishop,

We look forward to receiving your signed contract.

Please note that orientation begins tomorrow at 9 a.m. sharp at our Midtown headquarters. Professional attire required.

Human Resources Department

Alderidge-Hathaway Global

They expect me to accept. They know I will. Because what choice do I have, really?

I think about Mama's voice this morning. About the GoFundMe balance. About my bank account with its double-digit balance. I think about being able to pay my rent on time. About health insurance. About not having to choose between eating and keeping the lights on.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and click "Sign." The document processes my digital signature, then whisks away into the ether with a cheerful *ding*.

Done.

I've just signed away my life to a company I know nothing about, to work for someone I've never met, all because the timing was too perfect to ignore.

I stand and move to the window, looking out at the gray Brooklyn morning. Rain patters against the glass, blurring the world beyond.

"Thank you," I whisper to whoever might be listening. "But I don't believe in miracles."

The rain continues to fall, washing away everything but the cold certainty that I've just made a deal with a devil I haven't met yet.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text.

Empire of Desire

Welcome to Alderidge-Hathaway, Ms. Bishop. We look forward to meeting you tomorrow at 9 a.m. Your orientation packet will be waiting at reception.

I stare at the unfamiliar number, a chill crawling up my spine.

I never gave them my cell phone number.

Chapter Three

Bash

Manhattan from sixty floors up is a different city entirely. Not the chaotic mess of humanity that surges through the streets below, but something cleaner, more deliberate. A chess board where every move matters.

I take a slow sip of my coffee, watching rain streak the glass walls of the elevator as it climbs. The storm rolled in around dawn, turning the skyline into a watercolor of grays and silvers. Perfect weather for the mood simmering just beneath my skin.

My phone buzzes again. Fifth time this morning. I don't need to look to know it's Xander with another lecture disguised as brotherly concern. The headlines from this weekend's "*scandal*" are still making the rounds—"ALDERIDGE PLAYBOY COMPROMISES BILLION-DOLLAR PROJECT" splashed across every business publication with a pulse.

I switch my phone to silent and slip it into my pocket as the elevator climbs. The Imperial Club permits are still suspended, the board is still watching my every move, and my head is still pounding from last night's scotch. But none

of that matters right now. Not when I have meetings to crush and asses to kick.

The elevator doors slide open with a soft chime, revealing the gleaming expanse of the executive floor. It's all sleek lines and understated opulence, brushed steel, Italian marble, and glass walls that offer the illusion of transparency without surrendering an ounce of privacy. The Alderidge way.

I step out, my Italian leather shoes clicking against marble as I adjust my cuffs. The floor is quiet this early, just the way I like it. No sidelong glances. No whispers behind cupped hands. Just the low hum of expensive air conditioning and the faint click of computer keys.

I'm halfway to my office when I see her. And everything stops.

Impossible.

She sits at the executive assistant desk outside my glass-walled office, bent over a stack of files. Dark hair pulled back in a severe bun that shouldn't be sexy but somehow is. Slim fingers organizing documents with methodical precision. A navy pencil skirt and crisp white blouse that screams corporate competence.

But I know what those fingers feel like trailing down my chest. I know how that hair looks spread across hotel pillows. I know the taste of her skin, the sound of her gasp when—

She looks up, and our eyes lock.

For one heartbeat, maybe two, something flickers in those hazel depths. Recognition. Panic. Heat.

Then nothing. Her expression smooths into perfect professional blankness as she rises from her chair.

"Good morning, Mr. Alderidge," she says, her voice cool and controlled, like we're strangers meeting for the

first time. “I’m Savannah Bishop, your new executive assistant.”

So that’s how we’re playing this.

I take another sip of my coffee, using the moment to recalibrate.

“Miss Bishop,” I say, letting her name roll off my tongue like I’m tasting it for the first time. “Human Resources works quickly these days.”

She doesn’t flinch, doesn’t blush, just holds out a leather portfolio with the day’s schedule. “Your brother Xander requested a meeting at eleven. The board wants quarterly projections by end of day, and I’ve already pulled the files for your two o’clock with the permit office.”

Her fingers don’t quite touch mine as I take the portfolio, but I catch it anyway—the slight tension in her shoulders, the careful way she maintains distance.

“Impressive,” I murmur, flipping through the meticulously organized schedule. “And how long have you been with Alderidge-Hathaway, Miss Bishop?”

“This is my first day, sir.”

“First day,” I echo, closing the portfolio with a snap that makes her blink. “And you’ve already mastered my calendar. Quite the fast learner.”

A faint line appears between her brows, the first crack in her composure.

“I reviewed your schedule thoroughly before you arrived. I believe in being prepared.”

“I remember,” I say, the words hanging between us like smoke.

Her eyes widen, just slightly, before she catches herself.

“I’m not sure I follow, Mr. Alderidge.”

I smile, slow and deliberate.

“Being prepared. It’s a valuable quality in any... position.”

The double entendre isn’t subtle, but I want to see how she’ll handle it. How far she’ll take this charade. She doesn’t disappoint. Her expression remains perfectly neutral, though a faint flush creeps up her neck.

“I’ve also taken the liberty of organizing your emails by priority. The most urgent items are flagged.”

I step closer, invading her carefully maintained bubble of professional distance. “And what do you consider urgent, Ms. Bishop?”

The use of her last name is deliberate. So is the way I lower my voice, just enough to remind her of hotel rooms and whispered confessions.

“The Imperial Club situation,” she says, standing her ground despite the slight catch in her breath. “The permit office has requested documentation of your relationship with Ms. Winters, the woman from the photographs.”

And just like that, she’s redirected us back to business. Back to the scandal that’s been hounding me since Saturday morning. Clever.

“There is no relationship with Ms. Winters,” I say, my tone cooling. “A fact I’ve made abundantly clear to everyone who’s asked.”

“Of course.” She nods, not quite meeting my eyes. “I’ve drafted a statement to that effect, pending your approval.”

I arch an eyebrow. “First day, and already crafting corporate statements? Your resume must be fascinating.”

“I’m adaptable,” she says, and there it is again, that flicker of something behind her eyes. A secret. A lie. A challenge.

“So am I,” I answer, holding her gaze until she looks

away first. Small victory. “My office. Five minutes. Bring your notes on the Imperial project.”

I don’t wait for her response, striding past her into my glass domain. The door closes behind me with a soft click, and I allow myself a moment of pure, unbridled disbelief.

What the fuck is happening?

I set my coffee down harder than necessary, sending a few drops splattering across the spotless desk. The woman from the Regent Hotel, the one who disappeared with the sunrise, is now sitting outside my office, pretending we’ve never met.

I drop into my chair and swivel to face the rain-lashed windows. Savannah Bishop. Now her midnight mystery has a name.

My intercom buzzes. “Your brother is on line one,” her voice comes through, cool and professional, as if she hadn’t been whispering entirely different things in my ear three months ago.

“Tell him I’ll call back.”

“He says it’s urgent.”

“It always is with Xander.” I pause, then add, “Tell him I’m in a meeting.”

“With whom?”

“With my new assistant,” I say, watching her through the glass. “Who seems very eager to prove herself.”

She stiffens slightly before pressing the phone to her ear. Her lips move as she delivers my message, and I find myself watching the shape of them, remembering their taste.

The door opens, and she enters with a tablet and notebook.

“Your notes on the Imperial Club, Mr. Alderidge.”

“Sit,” I say, nodding to one of the chairs across from my desk.

She hesitates. “I can come back if you’d prefer to review these alone.”

“Sit,” I repeat, softer this time. A request, not an order.

She perches on the edge of the chair like she might need to make a quick escape. Her skirt rides up slightly, revealing a glimpse of thigh that brings back flashes of hotel sheets and tangled limbs.

“The Imperial Club,” I say, forcing my focus. “What do you know about it?”

“It’s your passion project,” she says immediately. “A historic property you’re transforming into an exclusive social club. The renovation has hit several roadblocks, most recently the permit suspension following...” she pauses delicately, “...this weekend’s publicity.”

“Publicity,” I echo with a grim smile. “Is that what we’re calling a hatchet job now?”

“The optics aren’t ideal,” she concedes.

“The optics are bullshit,” I counter, leaning forward. “I met a woman at a bar. We had a conversation. She left. End of story. The fact that she works for the permit office is a coincidence that someone is using to make me look corrupt.”

Her eyes flicker with something I can’t quite read. “The timing is certainly suspicious.”

“It’s more than suspicious. It’s calculated.” I stand, too restless to stay seated. “The Imperial Club is days away from final approval, and suddenly there’s a scandal tailor-made to halt the whole process? Someone’s playing games.”

“You think you’re being targeted?”

“I know I am.” I move around the desk to lean against the edge, close enough to catch her scent—the same

perfume that lingered on the hotel sheets. “The question is why. And by whom.”

She doesn’t back away, but her breath catches. “Perhaps someone who stands to gain from the Imperial Club’s failure?”

“Smart girl,” I murmur, and her eyes flash at the patronizing tone. “The Imperial sits on prime Manhattan real estate. Plenty of people would love to see me fail.”

“Specifically you? Or Alderidge-Hathaway as a whole?”

I study her face, the curve of her lips, the slight flush on her cheeks.

“Both. I’m the wild card in the Alderidge deck. The one people expect to fold under pressure.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” she asks, the question so direct it takes me by surprise.

“Fold?” I laugh. “Sweetheart, I don’t know the meaning of the word.”

There it is, the slightest flinch at the endearment. The first real crack in her armor.

“Then what’s your next move?” she presses, recovering quickly.

“That depends.” I hold her gaze. “How good are you at keeping secrets, Miss Bishop?”

The pen in her hand stills. “That’s part of the job, isn’t it? Discretion.”

“Absolutely.” I straighten, moving back behind my desk. The moment stretches between us, charged with things unsaid. “You’re going to stay for my call with Lucas Vaughn, my second at the Imperial. I want you to hear this firsthand.”

She nods. “Of course.”

I dial Lucas, putting him on speaker. “Lucas. Got a minute?”

“For you, always,” comes the dry response. “Though I’m still cleaning up your mess from the weekend, so make it quick.”

“I have my new assistant with me. Savannah Bishop.”

A pause. “New assistant? What happened to Caroline?”

“Apparently my reputation was too much for her delicate sensibilities,” I say, watching Savannah’s reaction. Nothing. “Miss Bishop is taking over.”

“Poor woman,” Lucas chuckles. “My condolences, Miss Bishop. Working for this one is like herding cats. Drunk, entitled cats.”

A smile tugs at the corner of Savannah’s mouth, so brief I almost miss it. “I’m up for the challenge, Mr. Vaughn.”

“So what’s up, boss? Please tell me you haven’t generated any new scandals since breakfast.”

“I’m saving those for lunch,” I deadpan. “I need an update on the permit situation. And any progress tracking down who might have arranged my little meetup with Ms. Winters.”

“The permits are still suspended pending an ethics review. As for Ms. Winters, she’s gone radio silent. Took a sudden vacation. Convenient, huh?”

“Too convenient,” I agree, watching Savannah take notes with quick, precise strokes. “Someone set me up, Lucas. I want to know who.”

“I’m working on it. But Bash... You know how this looks, right? After the other incidents? The board’s patience is wearing thin.”

“I know,” I say, jaw tightening. “But the Imperial Club opens on schedule. No matter what.”

“That’s the spirit. I’ll keep digging. In the meantime, try

not to get photographed with any more government employees, okay?"

"You take the fun out of everything," I reply, ending the call.

Silence falls over the office. I lean back in my chair, studying Savannah as she finishes her notes. Her handwriting is neat, controlled. Like everything else about her.

"Thoughts?" I ask.

She looks up, surprise flickering across her features. "You're asking for my opinion?"

"You seem intelligent. Yes, I'm asking for your opinion."

She hesitates, then sets her pen down. "I think someone is systematically targeting the Imperial Club. The question is whether it's personal or business."

"Why not both?" I challenge.

"Both would suggest a very specific enemy," she says carefully. "Someone who knows you well enough to make it personal but also has the resources to disrupt a major business venture."

"Smart *and* perceptive," I murmur, enjoying the slight flush that rises to her cheeks. "You're right. This feels targeted. The question is, what's the endgame?"

"And how do we counter it?" she adds.

We. An interesting choice of words for someone pretending to be a stranger.

"I'm going to need you fully up to speed on the Imperial Club," I tell her. "Everything. The history, the investors, the timeline. I want you at every meeting, every call."

She blinks. "Every meeting?"

"This project is everything to me," I add, leaning forward. "It's not just another Alderidge venture. It's mine. My vision. My legacy outside my brother's shadow."

Something shifts in her expression, a softening, perhaps. "I won't let you down, Mr. Alderidge."

"Bash," I correct her.

"Excuse me?"

"My friends call me Bash." I smile, watching her reaction closely. "And if we're going to be working this closely together, Miss Bishop, I think we should be friends. Don't you?"

She stands, smoothing her skirt with hands that aren't quite steady. "I prefer to maintain professional boundaries, Mr. Alderidge."

"Do you?" I ask softly. "With everyone?"

Our eyes lock, and for just a moment her mask slips. I see it all: recognition, desire, panic.

"Will that be all?" she asks, voice perfectly even.

"For now," I concede, enjoying the slight tremor in her hands as she gathers her notes. "But we'll be seeing a lot of each other, Savannah. I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

She nods stiffly and turns to leave, her heels clicking against the floor as she makes her escape.

The door closes behind her, and I count to ten before picking up my phone. Lucas answers on the first ring.

"That was quick. Miss me already?"

"She's the one," I say without preamble. "From the Regent."

A long pause. "Are you sure?"

"I don't forget women who leave before sunrise, Lucas. Especially not ones who leave me."

"Jesus. Want me to look into her?"

I stare through the glass at Savannah, watching as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. The slight tremor in her fingers. The quick glance toward my office.

“No,” I decide. “Not yet.”

“Bash,” Lucas’ voice carries a warning. “This timing is suspicious as hell.”

“I know,” I agree, watching as Savannah takes a call, her lips forming words I can’t hear. “But I’m going to find out what she’s hiding.”

I end the call, still watching her through the glass. She moves with practiced calm, but I see the truth now: the slight tension in her shoulders and the way she avoids glancing toward my office.

Her showing up here, now, when the Imperial Club is under attack? When my reputation is on the line? It can’t be coincidence.

But unlike the scandal with Ms. Winters, this surprise development might actually work in my favor.

I tap my fingers against the desk, lips curving into a smile. She walked into my territory pretending we’re strangers. But Bash Alderidge has never played fair.

She forgot me once. Left me behind without a backward glance.

And this time? She’s not getting away.

Chapter Four

Savannah

My keys hit the counter with a dull thud as I kick the door shut behind me. The deadbolt slides home with a satisfying click, the sound of separation between me and the rest of the world. Finally, solitude.

Rain taps gently against my window, the rhythm a stark contrast to the chaos of my day. Manhattan feels like it's a world away, not just a twenty-minute subway ride. In this tiny Brooklyn apartment with its water-stained ceiling and temperamental radiator, I'm just Savannah again. Not Miss Bishop, not Mr. Alderidge's new assistant, just me.

I kick off my heels, groaning as my arches decompress. Four-inch pumps were a terrible idea for a first day, but they'd made me feel taller, stronger. More worthy of standing in the shadow of a man who owns half of midtown.

A man who has seen me naked.

"Shut up," I mutter to myself, shrugging off my blazer. I refuse to think about him. About the way his eyes had tracked me all day, watching, waiting for me to break character. About the way he'd leaned across his desk, voice dropping half an octave when he said my name.

“How good are you at keeping secrets, Miss Bishop?”

Better than you know, Bash Alderidge.

I walk to the kitchen, filling the kettle and setting it on the stove. The familiar routine grounds me, pulling me back from the precipice of panic I’ve been teetering on since walking into that office this morning and seeing him. The surprise on his face had been worth it. A small, petty victory in what promises to be a losing war.

Because I’m not stupid. He recognized me instantly, despite my best efforts to blend into the corporate wallpaper. The severe bun, the minimal makeup, the professional armor—none of it mattered. One look, and he knew exactly who I was and what we’d done.

But he doesn’t know why I’m there, what desperate twist of fate brought me to his door.

The kettle whistles, and I pour steaming water over a chamomile tea bag, watching the water darken. The steam rises in curls, fogging the window above my sink. Through the condensation, the lights of the city blur into watercolor smudges of yellow and white.

I sink onto my secondhand couch, cradling the mug between my palms. The heat seeps into my skin, a small comfort against the chill of uncertainty. I’d survived today, held my own. Maybe, through some miracle, this job will work out.

\$75,000 a year. Benefits. Stability. Maybe even enough to convince Mama to finally see a specialist for her arthritis.

For the first time in weeks, I allow myself to exhale. To believe, just for a moment, that things might be okay.

My phone rings.

The shrill tone cuts through the quiet, so startling that tea sloshes over the rim of the mug and onto my fingers. I

hiss, setting the cup down and wiping my hand on my skirt as I reach for my phone.

Private Number.

My heart stutters. A cold call? A wrong number?

Bash?

The thought sends a jolt through me. Would he call? To say what?

I know what you did last summer—and by summer, I mean three months ago in my hotel room?

I answer before I can overthink it further. “Hello?”

Silence stretches for a beat. Then two. Long enough that I almost hang up.

“Good evening, Miss Bishop.”

The voice is unfamiliar. Male. Smooth and cultured, with the faintest hint of an NYC accent. Every hair on my arms rises.

“Who is this?” I keep my voice steady, though my pulse kicks up a notch.

“We haven’t formally met,” the voice continues, as if I hadn’t spoken. “But I believe we have a mutual acquaintance in Sebastian Alderidge.”

My fingers tighten around the phone. “Who is this?” I repeat, sharper now.

“James Wolfe.” The name slides between us like silk over steel. “I believe I’m the reason you’ve had such an... interesting day.”

James Wolfe. The name tugs at the edge of my memory—something from the research I’d done on Alderidge-Hathaway. A competitor? A partner? I can’t place him, but something about his tone makes my skin crawl.

“I don’t understand,” I say carefully, rising from the couch. Suddenly sitting feels too vulnerable. “How do you know about my day?”

A soft laugh, entirely devoid of warmth. “I know quite a bit about you, Savannah. May I call you Savannah?”

He doesn’t wait for my permission.

“I know that you moved to New York five years ago with dreams of Broadway. I know those dreams ended rather abruptly after an... unfortunate relationship. I know you’ve been working as a waitress at a mediocre diner in the Village. I know your mother’s flower shop in Virginia is three months behind on its rent, and the treatment for her arthritis isn’t covered by her insurance.”

Each word lands like a stone in still water, ripples of fear spreading outward. I press my back against the wall, as if I could somehow disappear into it.

“How—”

“I know,” he continues, cutting me off, “that someone made an anonymous twenty-five-thousand-dollar donation to your little GoFundMe campaign last week. Very generous, wouldn’t you say?”

The mug slips from my fingers and shatters on the floor, hot tea splashing across my bare feet. I barely feel it.

“That was you.”

It’s not a question. Somehow, I already know.

“A small gesture of goodwill,” Wolfe says, his voice like oil. “Consider it an advance on our arrangement.”

Arrangement. The word drops into my stomach like lead.

“I don’t have an arrangement with you, Mr. Wolfe. I don’t even know you.”

“But you do know Sebastian Alderidge, don’t you?” The silken tone hardens slightly. “Quite intimately, if I understand correctly. The Regent Hotel, wasn’t it? Three months ago?”

My breath catches. How could he possibly know that?

I'd told no one, not even Tessa, about that night. About the handsome stranger at the bar who'd made me forget, for a few stolen hours, about my failures and fears.

"What do you want?" My voice sounds distant, like it belongs to someone else.

"Direct. I appreciate that." Wolfe pauses, and I can almost hear him smiling. "I want what's already in motion, Savannah. I want you to continue your new job as Mr. Alderidge's assistant."

Relief floods me, quickly followed by suspicion. "That's it? Just... do my job?"

"Not quite." The pause stretches, deliberate and menacing. "You're not there by accident, Savannah. You're there for one reason: to be my eyes and ears. To tell me everything Sebastian Alderidge says, does, and plans. Particularly regarding the Imperial Club."

The Imperial Club. The project Bash had been so passionate about in our meeting today. The one he'd called his legacy.

"You want me to spy on him." The words taste bitter on my tongue.

"Such an ugly word. I prefer... information sharing."

"Why?" I demand, anger cutting through my fear. "What do you want with Bash's project?"

"Bash?" He catches the slip immediately, voice sharpening. "How familiar. I wonder what your new colleagues would think about that level of... intimacy with the CFO. Or is that something you're keeping to yourself?"

Heat surges to my face, a mix of shame and fury. "That's none of your business."

"Everything about Sebastian Alderidge is my business," Wolfe says, voice suddenly cold. "And now, everything about you is too. You see, Savannah, that donation to your

mother's GoFundMe? It can disappear as easily as it appeared. And that job you're so grateful for? I can make sure you never work in this city again."

"You're threatening me." My voice shakes despite my best efforts.

"I'm educating you on your options." He pauses, and I hear the clink of ice against glass. "Option one: You do as I ask, your mother keeps her shop, you keep your job, and everyone benefits. Option two: You refuse, the money disappears, and I make a call to Human Resources at Alderidge-Hathaway about a certain ethical breach involving their newest hire and the CFO."

My stomach lurches. He'd blackmail me about that night with Bash? Make it sound like I'd slept with him to get the job?

"You're the one who got me the job," I whisper, the realization dawning fully. "The job listing I never saw. The position I never applied for. It was you."

"Very good," he says, sounding genuinely pleased. "I did wonder how long it would take you to figure that out."

The room seems to tilt sideways. All day, I'd been congratulating myself on my performance, on maintaining my composure in front of Bash. All day, I'd thought I had some measure of control.

What a joke.

"Why me?" I ask, voice hollow. "There must be a hundred people who could spy on Bash for you. People who actually know something about business. About him."

"But none of them have what you have, Savannah." His voice drops, intimate and invasive. "None of them know what he tastes like."

Bile rises in my throat. I swallow hard, fighting the urge

to hang up, to throw my phone against the wall, to scrub myself clean of this entire conversation.

“What do you want to know?” I ask instead, hating myself for the surrender.

“Everything,” Wolfe replies simply. “His plans for the Imperial Club. His conversations with his brothers. His weaknesses. His secrets.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then your mother loses everything. And you?” He pauses. “You become the girl who slept her way into Alderidge-Hathaway. Even if you deny it, the damage will be done. Your reputation, your future—gone.”

Rain pounds harder against the windows, the gentle patter transformed into an angry drumbeat. Thunder rumbles in the distance, a fitting backdrop to the storm building in my chest.

“I need time to think,” I say, desperate for a way out.

“You have until tomorrow morning,” Wolfe replies, unmoved. “When you arrive at work, check your email. There will be an address for a secure messaging app. Download it. I’ll expect your first report by the end of the day.”

“And if I just disappear? Leave town?” The thought forms even as I speak it: of packing a bag, grabbing my mother, and running. Starting over somewhere new.

“Do you really think you can outrun me, Savannah?” The question is soft, almost gentle. “Do you think there’s anywhere you could hide where I couldn’t find you? Where I couldn’t hurt the people you love?”

My mother’s face flashes in my mind with her tired smile, the way her hands shake on bad days, her stubborn refusal to admit how much pain she’s in. She’s all I have left.

“I didn’t sell myself,” I whisper, more to myself than to him. “I just didn’t read the terms.”

“Eloquently put.” Wolfe sounds almost impressed. “We all make choices, Savannah. Some of us just make them blindfolded.”

The line goes silent, and for a moment, I think he’s hung up. Then:

“One more thing, Savannah. This conversation? It never happened. If you breathe a word of it to anyone, especially Sebastian Alderidge, I’ll know. And the consequences will be... severe.”

The call disconnects, leaving me in suffocating silence.

I drop the phone like it’s burned me. It clatters to the floor beside the broken mug, tea now cold and seeping into the worn floorboards.

Breathe. Just breathe.

But each inhale feels inadequate, like my lungs have shrunk to half their size. I slide down the wall until I’m sitting, knees pulled to my chest, fragments of ceramic digging into my skin.

The pain is almost welcome, something real to anchor me against the surreal horror of what just happened.

I’d thought the job was a lucky break. A chance to start over, to build something stable. Instead, it’s a trap, and I walked right into it. And Bash—

God, Bash. The way he’d looked at me today, equal parts confusion and determination. He knows something’s off about my sudden appearance in his life, but he can’t possibly imagine the truth. That I’m now a weapon pointed directly at him, loaded by a man I’ve never even met.

“I want what’s already in motion, Savannah.”

What does that mean? What game is Wolfe playing, and why is Bash his target?

I force myself to my feet, stepping carefully around the broken mug. My reflection catches in the window, pale and

wide-eyed, a ghost of the woman who left this apartment twelve hours ago with hope in her heart.

Outside, the city sprawls beneath a storm-darkened sky. Millions of lights, millions of lives, all moving forward while mine splits in two. The woman I was this morning—professional, composed, in control—feels like a stranger now.

I press my forehead against the cool glass, watching raindrops race down the other side. Each one carving its own desperate path to the bottom.

Tomorrow, I'll go back to that gleaming office. I'll sit at that desk outside Bash's door. I'll smile and nod, and do my job perfectly.

And I'll decide which version of myself survives this: the woman who betrays a man who's done nothing to deserve it, or the woman who risks everything, including her mother's future, for a principle.

Either way, something breaks. Either way, I lose.

Chapter Five

Bash

I'm late.

Not fashionably late. Not strategically late. Just fucking late.

The elevator climbs past the sixtieth floor, and I resist the urge to loosen my tie. My reflection in the polished brass doors stares back at me—composed, controlled, collected. Everything I'm not feeling.

The digital display ticks upward. Forty-four. Forty-five. I roll my shoulders back, settling into the persona New York expects. Sebastian Alderidge. The billionaire playboy with the Midas touch. The wild card of the Alderidge family.

I check my watch. Nine-seventeen. The executive meeting started at nine. Xander is going to be pissed. But then, when isn't he?

The elevator slows, and I draw in a breath, centering myself. When those doors open, I'm not the man who spent half the night reviewing permit applications and security protocols. I'm not the man whose legacy is hanging by a thread. I'm Bash Alderidge, who doesn't give a fuck about anything.

At least, that's what everyone believes.

The doors slide open onto the executive floor. The reception desk sits empty, which means she's already in the meeting, handling my absence without missing a beat. I'm not sure if I'm annoyed or impressed.

I stride past her desk, noting the perfectly arranged stack of reports, the leather portfolio placed at an exact right angle to her keyboard. Everything in its place. Nothing like the chaotic energy she'd exuded that night at the Regent.

My steps slow as I approach the glass-walled conference room. Through the transparent barrier, I can see her—Savannah Bishop—standing at the head of the table, laser pointer in hand, explaining something to the assembled executives with confident precision.

She's wearing a charcoal pencil skirt and crisp white blouse, her dark hair pulled back in that severe bun that makes her look like she's never had a wild thought in her life. But I know better. I've seen her with her hair down, eyes wild, lips parted on a gasp as I—

I shake the thought away. Not the time. Not the place.

I push through the conference room door, and all eyes turn to me.

"Sorry I'm late," I announce, not sounding sorry at all. "Traffic was a nightmare."

A lie. I walked from my penthouse six blocks away.

"Mr. Alderidge," Savannah acknowledges me without missing a beat, her tone purely professional. "I was just reviewing the quarterly projections for the Imperial Club renovations."

Not even a hint that forty-eight hours ago, she was a stranger. Not a flicker of recognition about that night three months ago. Nothing but cool, collected competence. It's starting to piss me off.

“Carry on, Miss Bishop,” I say, claiming the empty chair at the head of the table. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

Her eyes hold mine for a fraction of a second, long enough for me to search for a glimpse, any glimpse, of the woman who’d matched me drink for drink before matching me kiss for kiss. Nothing. Her gaze is a wall of polished marble.

“As I was saying,” she continues, turning back to the screen, “the timeline projection shows we can complete the west wing restoration within budget if we accelerate the heritage preservation approvals.”

I lean back, studying her as she speaks. Her posture is impeccable, her gestures precise. She knows the material cold, despite having been on the job less than two days. I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so suspicious.

The meeting drones on. Projections. Budgets. Permits. The endless parade of obstacles between me and proving to my family—to myself—that I can do this. That I’m more than the tabloid caricature everyone believes me to be.

But my focus keeps drifting to her. To the way she deflects Henderson’s prickly questions with unflappable calm. To how she anticipates my needs before I voice them, sliding a report in front of me seconds before I realize I need it.

Who are you, Savannah Bishop? And what game are you playing?

The meeting wraps up twenty minutes later. As executives file out, I remain in my seat, watching as Savannah efficiently collects her materials.

“Miss Bishop,” I call, just as she reaches the door. “A moment.”

She turns, expression neutral. “Of course, Mr. Alderidge.”

The door closes behind the last executive, leaving us alone in the glass fishbowl. I stand, buttoning my suit jacket, and approach her with measured steps.

“That was quite a performance,” I say, stopping closer than strictly necessary. “For someone who just started yesterday.”

“I reviewed the files extensively last night,” she replies, not backing away despite our proximity. “I believe in being prepared.”

“Clearly.” I study her face, searching for a crack in her composure. “You handled Henderson better than my last two assistants combined.”

“Thank you.” No smile. No pride. Just acknowledgement.

“Tell me something, Miss Bishop.” I lean against the conference table, deliberately casual. “Have we met before?”

There—the briefest flicker in her eyes, gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

“I don’t believe so, Mr. Alderidge.” Her voice remains steady. “I’d remember.”

The double entendre hangs between us, either accidental or the most subtle acknowledgment possible. I can’t decide which.

“Hmm.” I don’t bother hiding my skepticism. “You seem... familiar.”

“I have one of those faces,” she offers, shifting the folders in her arms. “Is there anything else you need for your ten-thirty?”

The deflection is so smooth I almost respect it.

“I’ll need the permit applications from my desk,” I say, watching her closely. “And clear my lunch. I won’t have time.”

“Already done,” she replies. “I had a feeling the meeting would run long. Your lunch appointment has been rescheduled for Thursday, and the permits are waiting in the car that’s taking you to the city planning office.”

I blink, momentarily caught off guard by her efficiency. “The city planning office wasn’t on my schedule.”

“It is now.” For the first time, a hint of something like satisfaction touches her lips. “Pierce Kane had a cancellation. His assistant owed me a favor.”

Pierce Kane, the city official whose approval we need for the Imperial Club’s next phase. The man who’s been dodging my calls for weeks.

“How did you manage that?” I ask, genuinely curious now.

“People respond to different approaches, Mr. Alderidge.” She meets my gaze directly. “Sometimes persistence works better than power.”

The implied criticism doesn’t escape me. Is she suggesting my usual tactics—the Alderidge name, money, influence—aren’t always the answer? Bold, from someone who’s been on the job less than forty-eight hours.

“Effective *and* opinionated,” I muse, stepping closer. “Interesting combination.”

She doesn’t retreat, but I notice her spine straighten, shoulders squaring ever so slightly. Fight response, not flight. Also interesting.

“Just efficient,” she counters. “The car will be here in twenty minutes. Is there anything else you need before you leave?”

I study her for a beat too long, enjoying the slight tension that builds in the silence.

“No, Miss Bishop. That will be all.”

She nods and turns to leave, her heels clicking against the polished floor with metronomic precision.

I wait until she reaches the door before adding, “For now.”

She pauses, just for a heartbeat, before continuing out without acknowledging the implication.

Point to me.

THE CITY PLANNING OFFICE REEKS OF BUREAUCRACY, with fluorescent lights buzzing overhead like dying insects and soul-crushing beige walls closing in. But Kane sees me. After weeks of dodging, he finally fucking sees me. The meeting’s brief, cold, but he’s reviewing our applications. It’s something.

By the time I hit the executive floor, the lunch hour chaos is in full swing—junior staff scurrying for elevators, assistants balancing salads and phone calls.

Savannah sits at her station, laser-focused on her screen. She doesn’t look up as I approach, though the slight stiffening of her shoulders tells me she knows I’m here.

“Kane’s reviewing the applications,” I announce, stopping at her desk. “Though I doubt we’ll hear anything this week.”

She finally meets my gaze, those hazel eyes giving nothing away. “That’s good news. Better than outright rejection.”

“Cautiously optimistic isn’t really my style, Miss Bishop.”

“No,” she agrees, the corner of her mouth twitching. “I wouldn’t imagine it is.”

There's a familiarity in her tone that scrapes against my nerves. Like she's known me for years, not days.

"I need the construction timeline for the east wing," I say. "And Barton's heritage assessment."

"They're on your desk, along with the revised restoration budget." She hands me a yellow sticky note, our fingers brushing. "And Lucas texted about '*the brunette situation*' being handled, whatever that means."

She pulls back a fraction too quickly. A tell.

"Thank you." I pocket the note, cataloging her reaction. "Join me in my office. We need to review the timeline."

It's not a request. She rises, gathering her tablet and portfolio, and follows me into my sanctuary.

My office is power distilled, all glass, leather, and a view of Manhattan that makes men feel small. I motion her to the chair with its back to the city. Petty? Perhaps. Effective? Always.

The glass desk between us holds only the files she mentioned and a single framed photo of me and my brothers at our father's funeral, grief chiseled into our features.

"The timeline," I prompt, settling into my chair.

She extracts a detailed Gantt chart.

"We have three critical paths running simultaneously: structural reinforcement, heritage restoration, and modern installations. The bottleneck is here," she points, "where heritage approval intersects with electrical upgrades."

I watch her more than the chart. The way she speaks about the Imperial Club betrays genuine interest, not just professional obligation. Her fingers trace the paper with precision that reminds me of how they once traced my—

"You've put a lot of thought into this," I observe.

"It's an important project," she says simply.

“To me, or to the company?”

Her eyes meet mine, steady and unreadable. “Does it matter?”

“It might.” I lean forward, invading the space between us. “Why did you apply for this position, Miss Bishop?”

The question catches her off-guard. Good.

“I...” She hesitates, recalibrating. “The opportunity presented itself. Your reputation as a... challenging employer suggested it would be professionally rewarding.”

“Challenging?” I echo, raising an eyebrow. “Is that what they’re calling me now?”

“Among other things,” she admits, a spark finally igniting in those careful eyes.

“And what do you call me?” I press, watching for cracks in her armor.

She weighs her answer, her tongue darting out to wet her lower lip.

“Determined. With something to prove.”

The assessment hits too close. I mask my surprise with a smirk.

“Careful, Miss Bishop. That almost sounds like you’ve been paying attention to me.”

“It’s my job to pay attention,” she counters.

“Is that all it is? A job?” I push.

She doesn’t bite. “What else would it be, Mr. Alderidge?”

She lets the question hang between us. I stand, circling the desk like a predator, until I’m leaning against it directly in front of her, our knees almost touching.

“I think you know exactly what else it could be,” I say, my voice dropping to a whisper.

She doesn’t move, but I see her pulse flutter at her throat.

"I'm not sure what you're implying."

"Aren't you?" I reach for the portfolio in her lap, deliberately letting my fingers brush hers. "I think you're very sure."

This time, I feel the almost imperceptible intake of breath. Confirmation.

She remembers everything. The bar. The elevator. The way she gasped my name when I—

Game on.

I flip through her work, prolonging the moment, savoring the tension crackling between us.

"Your work is impressive," I finally say. "But I need more on Kane's permit situation."

She grabs the professional lifeline.

"I've been researching his approval patterns. There's a correlation between project approvals and campaign contributions to his brother-in-law's city council race."

"Are you suggesting we bribe a city official, Miss Bishop?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm suggesting we understand the landscape." Her voice is steady now. "Knowledge is leverage, Mr. Alderidge."

I study her, this contradiction in a pencil skirt. Professional on the surface, something far more dangerous underneath. A woman who spent a night in my bed, then walked away. A woman now pretending we're strangers.

"You're not what I expected," I admit.

"What did you expect?"

"Someone less..." I search for the word, "...formidable."

The compliment lands between us, genuine and unexpected. For a heartbeat, her mask slips. Surprise flashes across her features before she rebuilds her walls.

"Thank you," she says simply.

I straighten, moving back around my desk. The moment breaks, but the electricity lingers.

“I need you to clear my schedule for Thursday afternoon,” I say. “I’m going to the construction site.”

“Already done,” she replies, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Let me guess—you had a feeling I’d want to go this week?”

A hint of a smile touches her lips.

“The heritage contractors are installing the restored moldings Thursday. I thought you might want to be there.”

There’s that unsettling sense again that she knows me better than she should. That she’s studied me, learned my patterns, anticipated my moves.

“You’re good at this,” I acknowledge.

“Thank you.” She rises, gathering her materials. “Is there anything else you need from me?”

The question is professional, but my mind instantly conjures a dozen inappropriate responses.

“The historical variance applications,” I say instead. “I need to review them before tomorrow’s committee meeting.”

“They’re in your email, but I’ll bring the hard copies as well.” She moves toward the door, then pauses. “Mr. Alderidge?”

“Yes?”

“The Imperial Club... it really is an impressive vision. Your father would be proud.”

The mention of my father is a sucker punch I wasn’t expecting.

“How would you know what would make my father proud?” I ask, sharper than intended.

She doesn’t flinch.

“I’ve read about him. About the legacy he built. The

Imperial Club represents something different, something uniquely yours within that legacy.”

Before I can respond, she’s gone, the door closing with a soft click.

I stare at the empty space she occupied, torn between irritation and fascination. She’s read about my father? About me? Any competent assistant would research their employer, but her assessment feels different. Personal.

Like she sees me.

My phone buzzes with a text from Lucas.

Meeting with contractors confirmed for 3.
Bringing the new assistant?

I type back.

Yes. Keep an eye on her. Something’s not adding up.

His reply is immediate.

You think she’s trouble or you just want an excuse to keep looking at her?

Both, I admit, though only to myself.

I move to the window, Manhattan sprawled below like a lover. The Imperial Club sits at its heart, caught between past and future. Just like the Alderidge name. Just like me.

Savannah Bishop is a puzzle I can’t solve. Her competence is real, her insights valuable. But her presence feels too convenient. No one just happens to land in the exact position to torment the man they walked away from.

There’s more to this story. And I’m going to figure out what it is.

My intercom buzzes.

“Mr. Alderidge?” Her voice is cool, professional. “The

historical variance files are ready, and your two o'clock is waiting."

"Thank you, Miss Bishop. I'll be right there." I straighten my tie. "And clear your schedule for Thursday's site visit. You'll be joining me."

She pauses just long enough to register as hesitation.

"Of course. I'll make the arrangements."

The intercom clicks off, and I allow myself a satisfied smile. The site visit will take us away from these glass walls and watching eyes and put us on my territory.

And maybe, with any luck, it will crack that perfect professional veneer she's hiding behind.

Because she flinched. Just once. But that's all I needed.

Game on, Savannah Bishop. You just blinked first.

Chapter Six

Savannah

My heels sink into soft earth as I follow the foreman across the construction site. The Imperial Club looms before us, a skeleton of what it once was and what it will become again. Steel beams pierce through century-old stone, a marriage of past and future that shouldn't work but somehow does.

Like me and Bash.

No, not like us. We aren't a marriage of anything. We're a mistake waiting to happen. Again.

I adjust my hard hat, acutely aware of how out of place I look in my tailored navy suit among the construction workers in their weathered boots and practical gear. Almost a week on the job, and Bash has already dragged me into the heart of his passion project.

"Miss Bishop." His voice cuts through the cacophony of drills and hammers. "Keep up."

He stands twenty feet ahead, outlined against the morning sun streaming through the gutted interior. Even in a hard hat and with dust on his Italian loafers, Sebastian Alderidge commands attention. The workers part for him like water, a sea of respect mixed with wariness.

I quicken my pace, tablet clutched to my chest like armor.

“The original moldings are being restored off-site,” he explains as I reach his side, gesturing toward elaborate ceiling details preserved in one corner. “Hand-carved by Italian artisans in 1897. We’re matching the technique exactly.”

“That must be expensive,” I note, making my face professionally interested rather than incredulous at what must be hundreds of thousands spent on decorative ceiling trim.

His mouth curls into that half-smile I remember too well from the Regent.

“Some things are worth doing right.”

The construction foreman—Rodriguez, according to his name badge—clears his throat.

“Mr. Alderidge, about the east wing timeline—”

“It stays as is.” Bash doesn’t even look at him, his attention fixed on a blueprint spread across a makeshift table.

“With all due respect, sir, we need at least another two weeks for the structural reinforcements before—”

“The timeline stays.” This time Bash does look up, his voice deceptively casual. “Unless you’d like to explain to the heritage committee why their gala needs to be postponed? Again?”

Rodriguez shifts his weight, clearly uncomfortable. “No, sir.”

“Good.” Bash’s attention returns to the blueprint. “We’ll reinforce the northeast corner first, then bring in Daniels’ team for the finish work.”

I watch this exchange with growing fascination. This isn’t the charming playboy who bought me drinks at the Regent. This is a man who knows exactly what he wants

and exactly how to get it. The authority sits on him differently than it does on other powerful men I've met. Not like Wolfe's cold calculation or the desperate machismo of my ex. Bash wears power like a second skin; it's comfortable, natural.

It's... impressive. And dangerous to notice.

"Miss Bishop, your thoughts on the alcove redesign?"

Bash's question yanks me from my reverie.

The blueprint swimming before me shows an elaborate redesign of what appears to be a hidden elevator system. I scan it quickly, searching for something intelligent to say. Thankfully, two semesters of theatrical set design before switching to dance gives me just enough knowledge to not sound completely ignorant.

"The sight lines from the main entrance would be compromised if you keep the original paneling," I say, pointing to a section. "You'd create a bottleneck during events."

Bash raises an eyebrow, surprise flashing across his features before he masks it. "Exactly what I was thinking." He turns to Rodriguez. "Adjust the panel configuration. I want a clean flow without sacrificing the historical elements."

Rodriguez nods, making a note, but I catch the quick assessment in his glance between Bash and me. Great. Now the foreman thinks I'm sleeping with the boss.

I mean, I did. Once. But that's not why I'm here.

The tour continues through the half-finished space, Bash pointing out features with the passion of a man revealing his soul rather than just a building. Reclaimed marble from the original quarry in Vermont. Hand-blown glass fixtures being crafted by the great-grandson of the original artisan. A wine cellar being converted from a Prohibi-

tion-era speakeasy, complete with the original hidden entrance.

I take meticulous notes, fighting to keep my expression neutral while my mind races to catalog it all. This isn't just a vanity project or a business investment. This is personal for him. A legacy.

And I'm here to help someone destroy it.

That knowledge sits like lead in my stomach as we climb a grand staircase, its carved banister shrouded in protective covering. Workers nod respectfully as we pass, their eyes lingering on Bash.

"We're restoring the original ceiling here," Bash continues, gesturing upward as we reach the second-floor landing.

I look up at intricate plasterwork, currently half-obscured by scaffolding, and gasp before I can stop myself. It's breathtaking, with concentric circles of carved flowers and vines radiating outward like a sunburst.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" There's something softer in his voice now.

I nod, genuinely moved. "It's extraordinary."

"My father used to bring me here as a kid," he says, eyes tracing the patterns above. "He'd point up at this ceiling and say, 'This is craftsmanship, Sebastian. The kind that outlasts its creator.'"

The unexpected glimpse into his childhood catches me off guard. For a moment, he's not my boss or the man I'm betraying or even the stranger I spent a night with. He's just someone sharing something precious.

I shouldn't care. I should focus on what Wolfe wants: insights into Bash's strategy, weaknesses in the project timeline, anything to leverage against him. Instead, I find myself asking, "Is that why this matters so much to you? Because of your father?"

His eyes snap to mine, suddenly sharp, assessing. I've crossed a line.

"The team's waiting upstairs," he says, professional mask back in place. "We should join them."

I follow him up another flight of stairs, mentally kicking myself. Stay detached. Do your job. Don't get personal.

The upper floor opens into what will clearly be the crown jewel of the club, a vast space with windows overlooking Central Park. Even gutted, it takes my breath away. A dozen people in suits and hard hats huddle around digital renderings displayed on tablets, discussing finishes and fixtures.

Bash strides into their midst, immediately commanding attention. I hang back, observing as he reviews design options, makes decisive calls, and challenges assumptions. He's thorough, specific, and occasionally brutal in his assessments. But he's also right. Each adjustment he suggests improves the overall vision.

I find my gaze lingering on the confident set of his shoulders, the decisive gesture of his hands. There's something magnetic about competence, about watching someone excel at what they do. And Bash excels at this. Not just the performance of wealth, but the actual creation of something magnificent.

When I catch myself admiring the way the morning light catches his profile, I quickly redirect my attention to my notes. This is a job, not a date. I'm here to gather information, not feelings. But then I look up to find him watching me.

Our eyes lock across the room, over the heads of designers and contractors. His expression is unreadable, but there's an intensity in his gaze that makes my skin heat. He doesn't look away, doesn't pretend he wasn't staring.

Instead, his mouth curves in that small, knowing smile that suggests he's been inside my head, reading my traitorous thoughts.

I break first, dropping my eyes back to my tablet, hating the flush I feel climbing my neck.

The meeting wraps up thirty minutes later, the team dispersing to their various responsibilities. Bash makes his way to my side as the room empties, standing close enough that I can smell his cologne, a smoky masculine scent.

"What did you think?" he asks, nodding toward the now-empty room.

"Impressive," I admit. "You know what you want."

"I always do." The double meaning hangs between us, charged and dangerous.

"The timeline seems aggressive," I say, deliberately keeping us on professional ground.

"It is." He doesn't apologize or explain, just states it as fact. "That's why I need everyone performing at their best. Including you."

"I'm here to do my job, Mr. Alderidge."

"Bash," he corrects. "And your job is to help me make this project succeed. Which means I need your honest impressions, not just what you think I want to hear."

The request for honesty from a man I'm actively deceiving feels like a slap. I swallow hard, guilt warring with self-preservation.

"Some of the contractors seemed... resistant," I offer carefully.

"Rodriguez thinks I don't understand construction." Bash shrugs, untroubled. "He's not entirely wrong. But I understand people, and I understand when someone's padding a timeline to cover their ass."

This blunt assessment startles a laugh out of me.

“Is that what he was doing?”

“Of course. Everyone here has their own agenda. My job is to make sure all those agendas align with mine.” His eyes hold mine. “What’s your agenda, Miss Bishop?”

My heart stutters. Does he know? Has he figured me out already?

“My agenda is to do my job well,” I say, fighting to keep my voice steady.

“Hmm.” He studies me, head slightly tilted. “Let’s continue this conversation somewhere more private.”

It’s not a request. I follow him through the construction site, back down the grand staircase, and into a waiting car. We drive in silence, the six blocks back to the Alderidge-Hathaway building stretching into an eternity.

I should be planning what to tell Wolfe, cataloging weaknesses in the Imperial Club project. I should be thinking about anything except the man sitting beside me, close enough that our shoulders would touch if either of us shifted slightly.

Instead, I find myself studying his profile in stolen glances. The strong line of his jaw, the perfect curve of his mouth, the intensity in his eyes as he reads something on his phone. How can someone look so effortlessly powerful? It’s not just the bespoke suit or the Italian shoes or the watch that probably costs more than my entire apartment. It’s something innate, a confidence that can’t be purchased.

“See something you like?” He doesn’t look up from his phone.

I turn to stare out the window, mortified at being caught. “Just wondering what’s so urgent on your phone.”

“Liar,” he says, but there’s amusement in his voice. “You were thinking that I’m not what you expected.”

The accuracy of this strikes too close to home. I was thinking exactly that.

“And what was I expecting?” I counter, trying to regain some control.

He finally looks up, tucking his phone away.

“The tabloid version. The reckless playboy. The family disappointment.”

“And that’s not you?”

“Parts of it are,” he admits with surprising candor. “But not the parts that matter.”

The car pulls up to the curb before I can respond. We ride the elevator in charged silence, up to the executive floor with its gleaming glass walls and views of the city. Bash leads me to a corner conference room, gesturing for me to take a seat at the sleek table while he closes the door behind us.

The glass walls leave us visible to anyone passing by, but there’s still an intimacy to the space that makes my pulse quicken. Bash moves to a credenza against the wall, where a crystal decanter sits beside matching glasses.

“Bourbon?” he offers, already pouring himself a measure.

“No, thank you.” My voice comes out steadier than I feel.

He shrugs, leaving the second glass empty.

“Your loss. It’s Pappy Van Winkle.”

The name means nothing to me, but from his tone, I gather it’s impressive. Another reminder of the world of difference between us.

He takes the seat across from me, bourbon in hand, leaning back with casual elegance.

“So, Miss Bishop. Impressive performance today.”

“Thank you.” I keep my expression neutral, professional.

“Almost too impressive,” he continues, watching me over the rim of his glass. “For someone so new to this world.”

There it is, the suspicion I’ve been dreading. I meet his gaze, willing myself not to fidget under his scrutiny.

“I do my research,” I say. “And I listen.”

“Research.” He sets his glass down, leaning forward. “Tell me, what exactly did your research tell you about me?”

“That you’re brilliant but impulsive,” I answer honestly. “That you have something to prove to your family. That this project matters to you more than people realize.”

His eyes narrow slightly.

“And how did you reach those conclusions?”

“The trade publications emphasize your intelligence but question your focus. Your brothers have clear roles in the company while you’ve bounced between divisions. And the way you talk about the Imperial Club—” I stop myself, realizing I’m revealing too much.

“The way I talk about it?” he prompts, voice dangerously soft.

I hesitate, then decide honesty is my best defense.

“Like it’s personal. Like it’s not just a business investment.”

Surprise, maybe even admiration, flickers in his eyes before quickly being masked again. “You’re observant.”

“It’s my job to be.”

“Is it?” He leans closer, the scent of bourbon and expensive cologne wrapping around me. “Or is there more to it than that?”

My phone buzzes on the table between us, screen

lighting up with an incoming text. I flip it face-down immediately, heart lurching at the glimpse of Wolfe's name on the screen. Bash's gaze sharpens, tracking the quick movement of my hand.

"Problem?" he asks, too casually.

"No." I force a smile, hoping it doesn't look as strained as it feels. "Just a friend checking in."

"Must be an important friend to interrupt a meeting." His eyes never leave my face.

"Not important enough," I say, making no move to check the message.

Something shifts in his expression, like he's making a new assessment, a recalculation.

"You surprised Rodriguez today," he says, changing tactics so abruptly I blink. "Not many people can read architectural drawings well enough to spot flow issues."

I shrug, relieved at the safer topic.

"I took some design classes in college."

"What was your major?"

"I—" I stop, unsure how much to reveal about my past. "Theater, initially. Then business."

"Theater." He rolls the word like he's tasting it, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. "Dancer?"

I nod stiffly, hating that he remembers. "Yes."

His eyes spark with something unreadable.

"And now you're in corporate America. Quite a change."

"Life takes unexpected turns," I say, the understatement of the century hanging between us.

"Doesn't it just?" He reaches for a folder on the table, opening it to reveal timeline projections for the Imperial Club. "These need your review before tomorrow's meeting with the contractors."

I reach for the folder at the same moment he slides it toward me. Our hands brush, his warm skin against mine, and the contact sends an electric current up my arm. I freeze, caught in the sensation, unable to pull away.

He doesn't move either, his fingers a whisper from mine on the polished table. His eyes lock with mine, and the air between us thickens, charged with something dangerous and magnetic.

"Savannah," he says, my name a low rumble in his throat.

The sound breaks the spell. I pull the folder toward me, severing the connection, dropping my gaze to the papers I can't actually see through the haze of awareness.

"I'll review these tonight," I manage, my voice not quite steady.

"See that you do." His tone has changed, become more distant. Professional again. "We have a lot riding on this project."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

"You can go." He dismisses me with a wave, already reaching for his phone. "Email me your notes by eight."

The abrupt shift leaves me off-balance, but I gather my tablet and the folder, rising on legs that feel less certain than they did this morning.

"Of course," I say, my professional mask slipping back into place. "Will there be anything else?"

"Not at the moment."

I turn to leave, feeling his eyes on my back as I cross to the door. My hand closes around the cold metal handle, a relief against my heated skin.

"Miss Bishop?"

I stop but don't turn. "Yes?"

"Whatever game you're playing," he says, voice pitched

low enough that only I can hear it, “I want you to remember something.”

Now I do turn, meeting his gaze across the room. “What’s that?”

His smile is dangerous, predatory. “I never lose.”

The challenge in his words follows me out the door, down the corridor, and all the way to the sanctuary of my desk. There, in the quiet moment before I need to be Savannah Bishop, executive assistant again, I lean against the wall and let out a shaky breath.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Wolfe’s message, still unread.

I should check it. Should answer him. Should do my job—the real reason I’m here.

But I don’t. I leave it buzzing, unacknowledged, as I straighten my spine and walk away.

For the first time, I’m not sure if that makes me weak... or finally free.

Chapter Seven

Bash

I watch the city lights flicker below in a constellation of ambition and desperation. Manhattan at night: a beautiful liar. Like the woman who's been driving me crazy for days.

My office is too quiet, the silence broken only by the hum of the building's systems and the occasional ping from my laptop. It's nearly ten, and the executive floor is empty except for security and the cleaning crew making their rounds.

And me. Waiting.

The quarterly projections for the Imperial Club sit open on my screen, columns of numbers that should have my full attention. Instead, I find myself staring at the door, checking my watch, wondering if she'll actually show.

Savannah Bishop. My assistant. The woman I can't figure out. The woman who's hiding something.

I drain my bourbon, letting the burn anchor me. I've spent a week watching her—her perfect professionalism, her careful distance, the way she flinches when I get too close. And beneath it all, that flash in her eyes when she thinks I'm not looking.

Recognition. Heat. Fear.

She remembers our night together. I'd bet my entire fortune on it. But she's playing some game I don't understand, pretending we're strangers, keeping secrets that ping like warning bells in my head.

The question is why.

My phone buzzes. A text from her.

On my way up with the finalized projections. Will leave them on your desk.

I set my empty glass down, adjusting my cuffs as I move to stand by the window. Casual. Controlled. Not like I've been waiting for this moment all day.

The soft ping of the elevator announces her arrival. I don't turn, watching her reflection in the glass instead. She hesitates at my office door, a slim folder clutched to her chest, her expression carefully blank. Even at this hour, she's immaculate, her dark hair pulled back, that navy dress hugging curves I remember too well, with posture as straight as a knife.

"You can bring them in," I say without turning.

She startles, not expecting me to be here. Good. I like catching her off guard. It's the only time I see cracks in that perfect facade.

"Mr. Alderidge." Her voice is professional, cool. "I thought you'd gone home."

Now I do turn, leaning against the window, studying her.

"Disappointed?"

"Of course not." Too quick, too smooth. "I have the revised projections you requested."

"Bring them here."

She hesitates, then crosses the room with measured

steps. Close enough to hand me the folder without being close enough to touch. Always careful with that invisible boundary between us.

I take the folder without opening it, my eyes never leaving her face.

“Let’s go through these together.”

“It’s late,” she objects softly. “I’m sure you want to get home.”

“Are you?” I move past her, toward the glass-walled conference room adjoining my office. “I’m not in any rush. Are you?”

Her throat works as she swallows.

“No, but—”

“Good.” I flip on the minimalist pendant lights, casting the room in a soft glow that leaves the corners in shadow. “In here.”

I don’t look back to see if she follows. I know she will. Whatever game we’re playing, she’s committed to it.

The conference room is intimate at night. Vast windows frame the glittering skyline, the glass walls reflect our silhouettes, and the polished table between us gleams like black ice. I take a seat at the head of the table, gesturing to the chair beside me.

She chooses one across from me instead. Of course.

“The revised timeline accounts for the structural issues in the east wing,” she begins, opening her copy of the report. All business. “I’ve highlighted the critical path items in yellow and—”

“Do you always work this late?” I interrupt, watching her fingers still on the page.

She blinks, thrown by the personal question. “When necessary.”

“And is it often necessary?”

“I do whatever the job requires.” Her tone is careful, measured.

“Admirable dedication.” I let my gaze drift over her face, lingering on her mouth. “What about outside of work? What does Savannah Bishop do for fun?”

Her shoulders tense, almost imperceptibly.

“I’m not sure that’s relevant to the projections, Mr. Alderidge.”

“Bash,” I correct her, again. “And I like to know who I’m working with.”

“You have my resume,” she counters, her eyes dropping back to the papers.

“I have what you want me to know.” I lean forward, resting my forearms on the table. “Not who you are.”

She doesn’t respond, just flips to the next page with deliberate focus.

“If you look at section three, you’ll see the updated vendor timelines for—“

“Stand up.”

Her head snaps up, eyes wide. “Excuse me?”

“Stand up,” I repeat, my voice low but firm. “I want to walk through this point by point. It’s easier side by side.”

For a moment, I think she’ll refuse. Then she rises slowly, gathering the papers. Her knuckles are white against the edges of the folder.

I move around the table to join her, close enough that I can smell her perfume—something light, with hints of vanilla and amber. Not the same as that night at the Regent, but equally intoxicating.

“Show me the critical path items,” I say, standing just behind her.

She spreads the papers on the table, leaning forward slightly. Her hand trembles, just once, before steadying.

“Here.” She points to a highlighted section. “And here.”

I step closer, not quite touching her but near enough that she must feel my breath on her neck.

“What about this vendor?” I reach past her, my arm brushing hers as I tap a name on the page.

She stiffens but doesn’t pull away.

“They’ve guaranteed delivery by the fifteenth, but I’ve built in a three-day buffer.”

“Smart.” I stay where I am, watching the pulse flutter at her throat.

“Always prepare for disappointment.”

Her eyes flick to mine, then away. “It’s just good business.”

“Is it?” I shift slightly, blocking her path to the door without seeming to. A subtle repositioning that leaves her trapped between me and the table. Not threatening—I’d never do that—but deliberate.

“Or is it a life philosophy?”

She straightens, turning to face me. Now we’re inches apart, her back against the edge of the table, her eyes level with my throat before lifting to meet my gaze.

“Mr. Alderidge—”

“Bash.”

“Mr. Alderidge,” she insists, voice firmer. “I think we should focus on the projections.”

“I am focused.” I study her face, the careful composure, the wariness in her eyes. “Just not on the papers.”

The air between us thickens, charged with something that’s been building since she walked into my boardroom three days ago. Since she walked out of my hotel room months before that.

“Tell me you don’t remember me,” I say quietly.

Her face remains impressively blank, but her pulse gives her away, visible at her throat.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Liar.” The word isn’t an accusation, but a caress. “You remember exactly who I am. What happened between us.”

“Nothing happened between us.” Her voice is steady, but her eyes flicker away.

“No?” I take a step closer, testing boundaries. She doesn’t retreat, though her breath catches.

“So you don’t remember drinking bourbon at the Regent Hotel? You don’t remember telling me about the audition you bombed? You don’t remember the elevator up to my suite, or how you gasped when I—“

“Stop.” Her hand presses against my chest, keeping me at bay. But she doesn’t push me away.

I cover her hand with mine, feeling the warmth of her skin, the slight tremor she can’t control.

“Tell me why you’re pretending. Tell me what you’re hiding.”

“I’m not hiding anything.” But her eyes say otherwise. They’re wide, conflicted, afraid.

“Another lie.” I hold her gaze, searching for the truth she won’t speak. “What are you afraid of, Savannah? That I’ll fire you? That I won’t? That whatever’s happening right now is more dangerous than you expected?”

Her lips part, but no words come out. Just a soft exhale that barely brushes against me, almost like a caress.

I lift my free hand to her face, my thumb grazing her cheekbone. She doesn’t pull away, though her eyes widen further.

“Tell me to stop,” I murmur, giving her the escape she needs but doesn’t take.

The moment stretches between us, taut as a wire. Her

hand on my chest curls slightly, fingers pressing into my shirt. Pushing away? Pulling closer? Even she doesn't seem to know.

I lean in slowly, giving her time to retreat, to deny, to stop this before it starts. She remains frozen, her eyes locked on mine, her breath shallow and quick.

When my lips touch hers, it's gentle. Testing. More a question than a demand.

For one heartbeat, then two, she doesn't respond. Then, with a small sound that might be surrender or protest, she kisses me back. Her lips soften under mine, her hand slides up to my shoulder, and the world narrows to this moment, this woman, and this truth we can no longer deny.

I deepen the kiss, one hand cupping her face, the other at her waist, drawing her closer. She tastes like coffee and mint, and something uniquely her that I've been craving since that night at the Regent. Her body fits against mine perfectly, just as I remembered, just as I've imagined every night since.

The kiss builds, heating, intensifying. Her fingers tangle in my hair, her body arches into mine, and I know I was right. She remembers. She wants this as much as I do.

Then, suddenly, she tears her mouth away. Her hand comes up between us, and before I can react, she slaps me. Hard.

The crack of her palm against my cheek echoes in the quiet room. I don't flinch, don't pull back, just watch as a storm of emotions crosses her face: anger, fear, confusion, and beneath it all, desire.

Her hand hovers in the air between us, trembling, as if she's not sure whether to strike again or touch the reddening mark she's left.

I catch her wrist, gently. "Feel better?"

“No.” The word is barely audible, choked with emotions she’s fighting to control.

“Why did you do that?” I ask, still holding her wrist. “Because I kissed you, or because you liked it?”

Her eyes flash.

“Because you’re my boss. Because this is inappropriate. Because—”

“Because you’re scared,” I finish for her. “Not of me. Of this.”

She pulls her hand from my grasp but doesn’t step away. Doesn’t run. The conference table is still at her back, my body still close enough to feel her heat.

“I should go,” she says, but makes no move to leave.

“You should.” I watch her carefully, gauging her reaction. “But you won’t. Not yet.”

Her eyes narrow, a flash of the fire I glimpsed at the Regent.

“You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.” I let my gaze drift over her face, lingering on her lips, still flushed from our kiss. “I know you’re lying about not remembering. I know there’s something you’re not telling me. And I know that when I kissed you just now, you kissed me back.”

She swallows hard, her composure cracking at the edges.

“This was a mistake.”

“Which part?” I step back slightly, giving her room to breathe, to think. To choose. “The kiss? Or pretending it didn’t affect you?”

For a moment, something real crosses her face: vulnerability, longing, regret. Then the facade slams back down.

“I need to go,” she says, her voice steadier now. “It’s late.”

I don't stop her as she gathers the scattered papers, shoving them haphazardly into the folder. Her hands aren't quite steady, her breathing not quite even. Small tells that satisfy something primal in me.

She heads for the door, back straight, steps measured. Professional to the last.

"Savannah."

She pauses, hand on the door, but doesn't turn.

"We're not done," I say quietly. "Whatever game you're playing, whatever you're hiding, I will find out."

Now she does look back, just a glance over her shoulder. Her eyes meet mine, dark and guarded.

"I told you, there is no game, Mr. Alderidge."

"There's always a game." I hold her gaze, letting her see the certainty in mine.

Something flashes across her face. Fear? Defiance? Regret? Then she's gone, the door closing behind her with a soft click that feels like a challenge.

I stay where I am, listening to the fading click of her heels down the corridor and the distant ding of the elevator. Only when I'm sure she's gone do I move to the window, watching the city below. My reflection stares back at me, a ghost against the Manhattan skyline, my cheek still tingling from her slap.

"So you do remember," I murmur to the empty room.

The kiss confirmed what I suspected, what I've known since she walked into my boardroom and pretended we'd never met. She remembers everything. Feels everything. But she's hiding something bigger than our past, something that made her flinch when I mentioned her audition, something that makes her check her phone with barely concealed anxiety.

Empire of Desire

Something that makes her lie to my face even as she melts in my arms.

I touch my fingers to my lips, still warm from hers. That kiss wasn't just a test; it was a declaration. A line drawn. A gauntlet thrown.

Whatever secrets Savannah Bishop is hiding, whatever reason she has for pretending, for lying, for fighting what's between us—it won't matter. Not in the end. Because now I know the truth.

She wants me as much as I want her. And that... that changes everything.

Chapter Eight

Savannah

I'm five blocks from the office before I realize I'm still running.

Not physically—I'm walking, one heel in front of the other, click-click-click on Manhattan pavement that stretches endlessly before me—but everything inside me is in flight.

My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape. My mind races, replaying the moment over and over: his lips on mine, my palm against his cheek, the crack of skin on skin that still echoes in my ears.

I kissed him back.

I *slapped* him.

And then I ran.

The realization stops me cold. A businessman in an expensive suit nearly collides with my back, muttering something about “tourists” as he swerves around me. I stand frozen in the human current of late-night Manhattan, my hand still burning from the contact with Bash's skin.

What have I done?

Broadway glitters ahead, a beacon of light and noise and

distraction. I should go home. I should take the subway back to Brooklyn, crawl into my own bed, and figure out how to face Sebastian Alderidge tomorrow morning after I kissed him, slapped him, and fled his office like a coward.

Instead, I turn toward the subway that will take me deeper into Brooklyn. To Tessa's. Because right now, the thought of being alone with these thoughts, this guilt, this—whatever this feeling is that's clawing at my chest—is unbearable.

My phone vibrates in my purse. The screen illuminates with a text from an unlisted number.

Productive evening, Miss Bishop?

Wolfe.

My stomach lurches. Does he know? Is he watching me? The kiss, the slap—was that on some security camera he has access to? I spin around, scanning the street, but it's just the usual Manhattan crowd: tourists with shopping bags, locals with purpose, everyone in their own bubble of existence.

I don't respond to the text. Instead, I shove my phone back into my purse and quicken my pace toward the subway entrance. The stairs descend into artificial light and recycled air, the rumble of approaching trains vibrating through the concrete beneath my aching feet.

These heels weren't made for running away.

I should have stayed. Should have explained. Should have... what? Told Sebastian Alderidge that yes, I remember our night together, and yes, I've been lying to his face for days, and oh, by the way, I'm spying on him for James Wolfe who's holding my mother's livelihood hostage?

The train doors slide open. I step inside, gripping the

pole as we lurch forward into the darkness. My reflection stares back at me from the window: disheveled hair, smudged lipstick, eyes too bright. I look like a woman who's been thoroughly kissed.

Or a woman coming undone.

I close my eyes, but that's worse. Behind my eyelids, I see Bash's face as he leaned in. The question in his eyes. The moment of hesitation, giving me time to say no.

But I didn't say no. I said yes with my body, with my lips, with the hand that curled into his shirt not to push him away but to keep him close. Until reality crashed back.

The train rocks gently as it speeds through the tunnel, and I sway with it, letting the motion hypnotize me into a kind of numb detachment. Three more stops. Two more stops. One more stop.

Tessa's neighborhood in Brooklyn is quieter than Manhattan, but still alive with that particular energy that makes New York feel like it's breathing. Bodegas illuminated from within. Late-night dog walkers. Music drifting from open windows. I navigate the familiar streets on autopilot, my feet protesting each step in these heels I should have changed out of hours ago.

Tessa's building is a pre-war walkup with character, which is real estate speak for "*the elevator breaks down twice a month and the pipes clang at 2 a.m.*" I climb the four flights to her door, each step a small agony, before knocking softly.

One heartbeat. Two. Three.

The door swings open, and there's Tessa, her dark curls piled on top of her head, wearing sweatpants and an oversized NYU t-shirt. One look at my face, and her expression shifts from surprise to concern.

"Jesus, Vee. What happened?"

I force my lips into what I hope is a convincing smile.

“Nothing. Just a long day. Can I crash here tonight?”

She steps aside, eyeing me skeptically.

“Of course. Always. But you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Just tired.” I slip past her into the warmth of her apartment. It’s small but cozy, filled with the eclectic mix of vintage finds and modern conveniences that define Tessa’s style. Books stacked on every surface. Plants thriving despite the minimal light. A half-empty glass of red wine on the coffee table.

“Bullshit,” she says, closing the door. “But I’m a good enough friend not to push. Yet.” She gestures to the kitchen. “Wine? Tea? Something stronger?”

“Tea would be amazing.” I slip out of my heels with a groan of relief, flexing my toes against the worn hardwood floor. “And maybe a change of clothes?”

While Tessa bustles in the kitchen, I sink onto her couch, letting my head fall back. The ceiling has a small water stain in the corner that I swear has grown since the last time I was here. I stare at it, tracing its irregular edges, focusing on anything but the memory of Bash’s hands on my waist, his lips on mine.

“Here.” Tessa appears with a steaming mug and a small pile of folded clothes. “Tea. And the sweats you left here last time.”

“You’re a lifesaver.” I accept both gratefully.

“Mmhmm.” She settles into the armchair across from me, tucking her feet under her. “So we’re going with ‘*just tired*,’ huh?”

I take a sip of tea, letting the heat warm my hands. “Tess—”

“Okay, okay. No interrogation tonight.” She holds up

her hands in surrender. “Bathroom’s all yours. Shower if you want. You know where everything is.”

In the small bathroom, I stare at myself in the mirror. The woman looking back at me seems like a stranger: her lips slightly swollen, her eyes too bright, her cheeks flushed. She looks guilty. She looks scared. She looks like she’s falling for the man she’s betraying.

I strip off my work clothes, letting them fall to the floor in a heap of expensive fabric and responsibility. The hot water of the shower hits my skin, and I close my eyes, tilting my face toward the spray. It washes away the makeup, the sweat of the day, and the lingering scent of Bash’s cologne that somehow transferred to my skin during those brief moments of contact.

It doesn’t wash away the guilt.

Clean and wrapped in a towel, I wipe the steam from the mirror and face myself again. Without makeup or the armor of professional clothes, I look younger. Vulnerable. The woman who left that hotel room months ago, running from a connection that scared her. I’m still running.

Dressed in Tessa’s borrowed clothes—soft gray sweatpants and an old Columbia t-shirt—I pad back to the living room. Tessa has moved to the couch, her laptop open, the glow of the screen illuminating her face in the dim room.

“Feel better?” she asks, glancing up.

“Much.” I settle beside her, pulling a throw blanket over my legs. “Thanks for not kicking me out.”

“As if.” She closes her laptop. “You want to watch something mindless? I’ve got a new baking show queued up.”

“Perfect.”

We sit in companionable silence as British contestants struggle to create elaborate pastries under time constraints. It’s soothing, this bubble of normalcy. For almost an hour, I

manage to forget about James Wolfe, about Sebastian Alderidge, about the impossible situation I've trapped myself in.

Until Tessa says, "Your Mom called me earlier."

My heart skips a beat. "What? Why?"

"Relax." She nudges my leg with her foot. "She was just checking if I'd heard from you. Said you seemed off when you talked this morning."

Guilt twists in my stomach. "I've been busy with the new job."

"The mysterious job you still won't tell me details about." Tessa raises an eyebrow. "Which, by the way, your Mom is over the moon about. She kept talking about how proud she is, how things are looking up for both of you."

I swallow hard. "Yeah."

"She seemed really excited about the flower shop too. Said business is picking up since she got that donation."

The mention of the donation—Wolfe's blood money—is like a knife between my ribs. I force a smile.

"That's great. She deserves it."

Tessa studies me for a long moment, then shrugs.

"Anyway, I told her you were just adjusting to the new gig. She seemed relieved."

"Thanks." I pull the blanket tighter around me, suddenly cold despite the warmth of the apartment.

Later, after Tessa has gone to bed, I lie awake on her pull-out couch, staring at the ceiling. Sleep feels impossible. Every time I close my eyes, I see Bash's face, feel his lips, hear his words:

"We're not done. Whatever game you're playing—whatever you're hiding—I will find out."

He'll find out. It's only a matter of time. And then what?

The thought sits like lead in my stomach. I reach for my phone, checking the time—2:17 a.m.—and see a notification I missed earlier. Mama has tagged me in an Instagram post. I tap on it, and my breath catches.

It's a photo of her flower shop, the morning light streaming through the windows, illuminating the rows of fresh blooms. Mama stands in the center, beaming at the camera, surrounded by her life's work. The caption reads:

Thank you to the angel who saved my dream 🌸❤️
Sometimes miracles happen just when you need them most.
#blessed #smallbusiness #flowershop #dreams

The angel. Wolfe.

The man threatening to destroy everything if I don't help him destroy Sebastian Alderidge.

My vision blurs with tears. I lock the phone screen and shove it under my pillow, as if I can bury the truth along with it. But it's too late. The image is burned into my mind: my mother's face alight with gratitude for the very person using her as a weapon against me.

And me? What am I becoming in this twisted game?

I'm not a con artist. Not a liar. Not a traitor.

But as I lie in the dark, with the taste of Sebastian Alderidge still on my lips and the weight of my betrayal pressing down on my chest, those labels fit more snugly than I want to admit.

A tear slips down my cheek, then another. I don't bother wiping them away. There's no one here to see, no one to maintain the facade for. In the darkness of Tessa's living room, with the distant sounds of Brooklyn filtering through the windows, I allow myself to cry.

Not loud, choking sobs that might wake Tessa. Just silent tears that track paths down my temples and into my hair. The kind of crying that breaks people slowly, eroding

them from the inside out until there's nothing left but hollow spaces where integrity used to live.

I press my palms against my eyes, trying to stem the flow, trying to pull myself together. This isn't who I am. This isn't who I want to be.

But who am I now? The woman who walked out of that hotel room all those months ago, determined to stand on her own? The daughter who would do anything to protect her mother? The assistant who's betraying her boss even as she falls for him?

All of these versions of me exist simultaneously, fragments of a whole that's cracking under the pressure.

I roll onto my side, pulling the blanket over my shoulder. The tears have stopped, leaving my face tight and my eyes swollen. Exhaustion pulls at the edges of my consciousness, but my mind won't quiet.

There's no clean way out of this. Only through.

Tomorrow, I'll have to face Sebastian Alderidge again. I'll have to look him in the eye, knowing I kissed him back, knowing I'm lying to him, knowing that every moment in his presence pulls me deeper into a web I didn't choose but now can't escape.

Tomorrow, I'll have to decide: who am I going to be? The woman who keeps running, or the woman who finds another way?

The answer feels just out of reach, hovering at the edge of consciousness as I finally drift into an uneasy sleep.

My dreams are fragmented, disjointed: Bash's lips on mine, my mother's smile among her flowers, and Wolfe's shadow stretching across it all.

Chapter Nine

Savannah

I wake before my alarm, the borrowed sheets twisted around my legs like ropes. The unfamiliar ceiling of Tessa's apartment stares back at me, its water stain now a Rorschach test for my anxiety.

5:15 a.m. The city outside is barely stirring, but my mind has been racing for hours.

I kissed Sebastian Alderidge.

I slapped Sebastian Alderidge.

I ran from Sebastian Alderidge.

And now, in approximately three hours, I have to face him again.

"You're up early," Tessa says from the kitchen doorway, her voice sleep-rough. She clutches a mug of coffee like it's the only thing keeping her upright.

"Want some?"

"God, yes."

She pours me a cup, and I cradle it between my palms, inhaling the bitter scent like it might clear my head. It doesn't.

“You planning to tell me why you showed up looking like someone died last night?”

She leans against the counter, studying me over the rim of her mug.

I consider lying, crafting some story about workplace stress or subway mishaps. But this is Tessa, the one person who’s seen me at my absolute worst, who held my hair back when I threw up that first night after the Broadway callback, who helped me pack my tiny apartment when I could no longer afford the rent.

“I kissed my boss,” I say, the words falling like stones.

Tessa’s eyebrows shoot up. “The hot billionaire one?”

“Is there another one I haven’t mentioned?”

“Damn.” She takes a sip of coffee. “And that’s... bad?”

“I also slapped him.”

She chokes mid-swallow.

“Okay, now *that* I need details on.”

But I can’t explain, not fully. I can’t tell her about Wolfe’s threats or about my mother’s flower shop, or about the fact that I’m supposed to be spying on Bash, not kissing him. Can’t tell her that the real reason I showed up at her door wasn’t the kiss or the slap but the nauseating realization that I’m falling for the man I’m betraying.

“It’s complicated,” I say instead, staring into my coffee like it might offer answers. “Professional boundaries and all that.”

“Professional boundaries,” Tessa repeats flatly. “Right. Because slapping your boss is a normal workplace interaction.”

I manage a weak smile.

“I should get ready. Can I borrow something to wear?”

She recognizes the deflection but lets it slide.

“Sure. But Vee? Just... be careful, okay? Whatever this is with your mystery boss, it sounds messy.”

Messy doesn't begin to cover it.

Forty minutes later, I'm dressed in a borrowed black pencil skirt and a cream blouse that's a touch too tight across the chest but will have to do. Tessa's heels pinch my toes, but they complete the makeshift professional ensemble.

“You look like a sexy librarian,” Tessa observes as I gather my things.

“Very ‘I'll file your briefs, Mr. Alderidge.’”

I throw a decorative pillow at her. “You're not helping.”

“I'm absolutely helping. You need to laugh or you'll crack.”

She's right, but I'm not ready to admit it. I check my phone, but there are still no texts from Wolfe since last night's cryptic message. Small mercies.

“Thanks for the emergency crash space,” I say, shouldering my bag. “And the clothes.”

“Anytime. And Vee?” She catches my arm as I reach for the door. “Whatever's going on with you and Mr. Moneybags, just remember: you don't owe anyone your soul.”

If only she knew.

The subway ride to Midtown is a blur of anxiety and rehearsed scenarios. What will I say when I see him? What will *he* say? Will he fire me? Pretend nothing happened? Push for answers I can't give?

BY THE TIME I STEP OFF THE ELEVATOR ONTO THE executive floor, my heart is hammering so hard I'm certain everyone can hear it. The office is already humming with the steady pulse of corporate ambition.

I scan the floor automatically, both dreading and hoping to see Bash's tall frame and confident stride. But there's no sign of him. Just the usual morning bustle of assistants and executives preparing for the day ahead.

I make it to my desk without incident, settling into my chair with what I hope looks like professional composure rather than the coiled tension I feel. My computer screen blinks to life, and I dive into emails, grateful for the distraction.

Thirty minutes pass. Then an hour. No sign of Bash.

The tension in my shoulders eases incrementally. Maybe he's in meetings. Maybe he's working from another office today. Maybe I've earned a brief reprieve from the confrontation I've been dreading.

Then his voice cuts through the ambient office noise, and my entire body goes rigid.

"Morning, everyone."

I don't look up. Can't look up. I keep my eyes fixed on my screen as he strides past, the scent of his cologne lingering in his wake. My fingers hover over my keyboard, suddenly unsure what they were doing.

His office door closes with a soft click that somehow sounds like a gunshot to my hyper alert senses.

Breathe. Just breathe.

I force myself to focus, to respond to emails and review the day's schedule. But every cell in my body is attuned to the closed door just fifteen feet away and the man behind it who now holds not only my professional future but a dangerous amount of my personal thoughts as well.

At precisely 10:17 a.m., the intercom on my desk buzzes.

"Ms. Bishop, could you step into my office, please?"

His voice is measured, professional. Giving away nothing.

I stand, smoothing down Tessa's borrowed skirt, and mentally rehearse my approach one last time. Professional. Distant. Apologetic about the slap but firm about boundaries. I can do this.

The walk to his office feels like crossing a minefield. Each step carefully placed, breath held, waiting for the explosion.

I knock once, then enter at his "Come in."

Bash sits behind his desk, sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms, tie loosened at the throat. He looks tired, the shadow of stubble darkening his jaw. The memory of that jaw beneath my fingertips flashes unbidden, and I push it firmly away.

"You wanted to see me?" My voice comes out steadier than I expected.

He doesn't look up immediately, finishing whatever he's writing. When he does raise his eyes to mine, there's none of the heat from yesterday. No anger about the slap. No teasing about the kiss. Just cool professionalism that somehow feels worse than any confrontation.

"The Imperial Club permit application is stalled again." He slides a file across the desk toward me. There's a yellow Post-it note attached: *Fix this?*

Not an order. A question.

I take the file, tucking it against my chest like a shield.

"What's the issue?"

"Building code compliance questions. Something about the historical façade modifications." He leans back in his chair, studying me. "The contractor says we're looking at a two-week delay unless someone can push it through."

Two weeks. In construction terms, that's an eternity. In billionaire timelines, it's unacceptable.

"I'll handle it," I say, already mentally cataloging who I need to call and what arguments might work.

He nods once. "Good."

That's it? No mention of yesterday? No lingering looks or loaded comments?

I stand there a moment too long, waiting for... something. Anything.

"Was there something else?" he asks, his tone neutral.

A dozen responses flash through my mind.

Yes, there's something else. We kissed. I slapped you. I'm spying on you for James Wolfe. I'm starting to care too much. I'm drowning.

"No," I say. "Nothing else."

His eyes hold mine for a beat longer than necessary, and for a split second, I think I see something flicker there. Frustration? Disappointment? But then it's gone, replaced by that impenetrable professionalism.

"The permit needs to be resolved by end of day," he says, turning back to his work. Dismissal clear.

I retreat, closing his door behind me with trembling fingers.

What just happened?

Back at my desk, I flip open the file and try to make sense of the bureaucratic jargon. The Imperial Club renovation has hit a snag with the Landmarks Preservation Commission, something about the proposed modifications to the historic façade not aligning with preservation guidelines.

It's the kind of red tape that can strangle a project, the kind that usually requires lawyers, meetings, and weeks of negotiation.

I have until the end of the day.

Taking a deep breath, I pick up the phone and dial the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Time to see if all those years of sweet-talking Broadway producers into giving me a chance have any real-world application.

Three transfers later, I finally reach someone with actual authority, a harried-sounding woman named Patricia who clearly wasn't expecting calls about the Alderidge application today.

"The issue is with section 5.3 of the proposal," she explains, sounding bored. "The alterations to the west-facing windows don't match historical precedent."

"I understand completely," I say, infusing my voice with just the right blend of respect and urgency. "But perhaps there's been a misunderstanding. The west-facing modifications actually restore the original 1928 design."

There's a pause. "That's not what our records show."

"I'm looking at the original architectural drawings right now," I lie smoothly. "They clearly show the arched windows with the decorative ironwork that Mr. Alderidge is proposing to restore."

"I don't have those drawings in my file," Patricia says, hesitation creeping into her voice.

"I'd be happy to send them over right away. In fact, I think you'll find that our proposal is actually more historically accurate than the current façade, which was modified in the 1970s renovation."

More silence as she presumably reviews her files.

"Even if that's true, there's a process for these approvals. The committee needs to—"

"Of course," I interrupt gently. "And we respect that process completely. But given that this is a restoration rather than a modification, perhaps it could qualify for an expe-

dited review? After all, we're helping preserve the building's historical integrity, not changing it."

I continue weaving my argument, part truth, part fabrication, all delivered with the absolute conviction of someone who knows they're right. It's a performance, and I'm good at those. Or at least, I used to be.

Twenty minutes in, I sense Patricia wavering. Thirty minutes, and she's suggesting a workaround.

"If you can get the modified drawings to me by three, I might be able to get a provisional approval," she says finally. "No promises."

"You're saving a piece of New York history," I tell her earnestly. "Thank you."

As I hang up, I catch movement in my peripheral vision. Bash, leaning against the doorframe of his office, watching me. How long has he been standing there? How much did he hear?

Our eyes lock for a brief, charged moment. His expression is unreadable, but something in his stance, the slight tilt of his head, the way he stands perfectly still, suggests he's been there for a while.

He doesn't say anything, just giving me a slight nod before disappearing back into his office.

My heart races, but not from anxiety this time. From something that feels dangerously like pride.

Chapter Ten

Savannah

I spend the next three hours assembling the modified drawings, calling in favors from the architectural team, and crafting an email to Patricia that walks the fine line between persuasive and pushy. At 2:57 p.m., I send the final documents.

At 4:32 p.m., my email pings with a response.

Provisional permit approved pending final committee review. Work may proceed immediately on the west façade renovations.

A small victory, but a victory nonetheless. One that will save the project two weeks of delays and thousands of dollars.

I've barely finished reading the email when Bash emerges from his office, shrugging into his suit jacket. He stops by my desk, his expression still carefully neutral.

"The permit?" he asks.

"Approved. Provisionally, but work can continue."

He nods once, that same economical movement from earlier. But this time, there's something else in his eyes, a flicker of what might be approval, maybe even respect.

“Good work,” he says simply.

Two words. Just two words. But they feel like a physical touch, warming me from the inside out.

He turns to leave, then pauses.

“The team is presenting renovation updates at 7. Conference room B. You should be there.”

It’s not quite a request, not quite an order. It’s an invitation.

“I’ll be there,” I say, trying to keep the eagerness from my voice.

He holds my gaze for a beat longer than necessary, and for a moment, I think he might say something else. About yesterday. About us. About whatever this tension is that crackles between us despite everything.

But he just nods again and walks away, leaving me with the lingering scent of his cologne and a strange, unfamiliar feeling in my chest.

Pride. That’s what it is. Not because I impressed Bash Alderidge, but because I actually did something good. Something real. Something that wasn’t about Wolfe’s manipulation or my own survival, but about proving my competence, my worth.

My phone vibrates with a text. The momentary glow fades as I see the unlisted number.

Did you forget who put you there?

Wolfe. Of course. Right on cue to remind me that this brief moment of satisfaction isn’t really mine to enjoy.

Cold washes over me, followed by the now-familiar twist of nausea. The weight of his threat, the memory of why I’m really here, crashes back over me in waves.

But instead of the automatic fear and compliance I’ve

felt before, something else rises in its place. Something hot and sharp and unexpected.

Anger.

I stare at the text, at the implicit threat behind those seven words.

Did you forget who put you there?

As if I'm nothing but his puppet, his tool. As if anything good I accomplish is because of him, not despite him.

Before I can overthink it, I block the number.

My hand trembles as I set the phone down, half expecting immediate retribution—the building to shake, alarms to sound, my mother to call in panic. But there's only the steady hum of the office around me, the distant ping of elevators, and the tap of fingers on keyboards.

The world doesn't end because I blocked James Wolfe's number.

But something shifts inside me, a tectonic plate sliding into a new position. I've been so focused on what I stand to lose that I've ignored what I might gain by standing up for myself.

Not that blocking a number is the same as true defiance. Wolfe will find other ways to reach me, other ways to threaten. But this small act of rebellion feels significant, like the first crack in a dam.

By six-thirty, the office has emptied most of its staff. I freshen up in the bathroom, attempting to tame my hair and reapply borrowed lipstick. The woman in the mirror looks different somehow, still wearing Tessa's too-tight blouse, still exhausted, still caught in an impossible situation, but there's a steadiness in her eyes that wasn't there this morning.

I gather my things and head toward Conference Room B, passing Bash's empty office on the way. Through the glass

wall, I can see his desk, still covered in papers, his chair pushed back at an angle as if he left in a hurry.

The cleaning staff hasn't been through yet, and a coffee cup sits abandoned near the edge of his desk, the same spot where his hands rested yesterday before he leaned in to kiss me.

I pause, momentarily caught in the memory of his fingers brushing my cheek and the question in his eyes before his lips met mine. The rush of heat that had nothing to do with anger and everything to do with want.

What would have happened if I hadn't slapped him? If I'd let myself have what I wanted, consequences be damned?

But the consequences aren't just for me, are they? They're for my mother, for her flower shop, for the dream she's fought to keep alive all these years.

The elevator dings down the hall, pulling me from my thoughts. I turn to see Bash step out, engaged in conversation with two men I recognize as part of the construction team. He hasn't noticed me yet, standing here staring into his empty office like some lovesick teenager.

I should move, continue toward the conference room, pretend I wasn't just fantasizing about a kiss that can never happen again. But I remain frozen, watching him and the confident set of his shoulders. The way he gestures as he speaks, precise and controlled. The slight smile that transforms his face when one of the men says something amusing.

He glances up, and our eyes meet across the distance. His smile fades, replaced by something more complex: recognition, wariness, and something else I can't quite name.

For a moment, we're suspended in silent acknowledg-

ment of each other, of everything said and unsaid between us. Then he nods toward the conference room for me to join them and continues walking with his companions.

I follow at a distance, clutching my tablet like a shield. As I approach the conference room, my phone vibrates with a text from a new number.

Blocking me? Brave. Stupid, but brave.
Don't forget what's at stake, Savannah.

My stomach drops. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

I stare at the screen, at Wolfe's words, at the implied threat to everything I care about.

"I won't do it for you," I whisper to the phone, to Wolfe and to myself. "Not anymore."

Then I silence the device, tuck it into my bag, and walk into the conference room where Bash stands at the head of the table, watching the door. Watching me.

His eyes narrow slightly as I enter, as if he can sense the shift in me, the silent rebellion taking root. He doesn't smile, doesn't acknowledge me beyond a brief nod, but his gaze lingers a moment longer than necessary.

I take a seat at the far end of the table, opening a fresh page on my tablet, ready to take notes. Ready to be useful. Ready to be seen. Not as Wolfe's spy. Not as Bash's conquest. But as myself: complicated, conflicted, and finally, finally beginning to choose.

The meeting begins, but my mind keeps circling back to that blocked number, to the new text, and the whispered declaration that feels like the first honest thing I've done in weeks.

I won't do it for you. Not anymore.

One hour later, the meeting finally wraps up. I've taken careful notes, contributed where appropriate, and managed

to avoid direct interaction with Bash despite being hyper aware of his presence throughout.

The construction team files out, leaving just me and one of the designers gathering our things. Bash has already left for another meeting, his absence both a relief and a disappointment.

I'm zipping my bag when my stomach growls loudly enough for the designer to glance over with a smile.

"Missed dinner too, huh?" he says sympathetically.

"Hazard of the job," I reply, embarrassed.

"There's usually something in the break room fridge. Help yourself. I'm heading out."

I thank him and wait until he's gone before slipping down the hall toward the break room. A sad sandwich or leftover salad sounds infinitely better than the protein bar crumbled at the bottom of my bag.

The lights are already on as I approach. I pause in the doorway, my breath catching as I take in the lone figure standing at the counter. Bash, jacket discarded, sleeves pushed up, making coffee like it's the middle of the workday instead of nearly 9 p.m.

He looks up at my footsteps, and for a brief, unguarded moment, I see surprise, then something warmer flickers across his features before his expression settles into its usual professional neutrality.

"Permit's cleared," I say inanely, as if we didn't just spend four hours discussing the project that requires said permit.

He smiles. Actually smiles, not the polished, professional one from the meeting, but something smaller, more genuine. "I know."

The break room suddenly feels too small, the air

between us charged with everything we're not saying. The kiss. The slap. The fact that I ran. The fact that he let me.

"Coffee?" he offers, holding up the pot.

A simple question with complicated implications. Stay or go? Engage or retreat? Choose him or choose safety?

I hesitate on the threshold, one foot in the room, one foot in the hall, caught between worlds. And I realize with startling clarity that I'm tired of running.

"Yes," I say, stepping fully into the room. "I'd like that."

He pours coffee into two mugs, the rich aroma filling the small space. My fingers brush his as I accept the cup, and that brief contact sends electricity dancing up my arm.

"Long day," he says, leaning against the counter.

"Long week." I take a sip, surprised to find it's exactly how I like it, with just a splash of cream. He noticed. Of course he noticed.

Silence stretches between us, not exactly uncomfortable but heavy with unspoken words. Through the windows, Manhattan glitters like scattered stars, reminding me how late it's gotten.

"You did good work today," he says finally. "With the permit."

"Just doing my job."

His eyes find mine over the rim of his mug.

"We both know that's not entirely true."

My heart stutters. Does he know about Wolfe? About why I'm really here?

But he continues, "Most assistants wouldn't have fought for it like that. Wouldn't have found a solution."

"Most assistants probably wouldn't have slapped their boss either," I say before I can stop myself.

A ghost of a smile plays on his lips. "Probably not."

More silence, but different now. Lighter.

“About that—” I start.

“Don’t.” He sets his mug down. “You don’t need to explain.”

But I want to. I want to tell him everything, to unburden myself of all these secrets weighing me down. Instead, I watch him fidget with his tie, a rare display of uncertainty from Sebastian Alderidge.

“My brother’s getting married,” he says abruptly.

“I know.” The invitation to Eli and Isla’s wedding has been the talk of the office for weeks.

“Right. Of course.” He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up in a way that makes my fingers itch to smooth it. “The thing is...”

I’ve never seen him struggle for words before. It’s oddly endearing.

“The thing is,” he tries again, “I need a date. For the wedding.”

My coffee cup freezes halfway to my lips. “Oh?”

“Would you go with me?”

The question hangs in the air between us, deceptively simple but loaded with implications. Professional boundaries. Personal history. The kiss we’re not talking about. The secrets I’m keeping.

“As your assistant?” I ask carefully.

“As my plus one.” His eyes hold mine, serious now. “Just... be there with me, Savannah. No titles, no expectations. Just us.”

Just us. As if anything between us could ever be that simple. But God help me, I want it to be.

“Okay,” I hear myself say.

His eyebrows lift slightly. “Okay?”

“Yes. I’ll go with you.”

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise,

Lily Rae

slow, warm, and full of promise. For a moment, I let myself believe that maybe there's a path through this mess that doesn't end in heartbreak.

Then my phone buzzes in my bag, and reality crashes back.

But for now, in this quiet break room with coffee and starlight and Bash's smile, I choose to believe in possibility.

Chapter Eleven

Bash

I adjust my cufflinks for the third time, the platinum cool against my fingertips. The mirror reflects back a stranger—Sebastian Alderidge in full formal regalia, the dutiful younger brother and perfect groomsman, hair styled just so, the bespoke Armani tux fitting exactly as it should.

Perfect. Disciplined. Bullshit.

Because underneath this polished exterior, I'm coming apart at the seams.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor." Xander leans against the doorframe of the guest suite, already immaculate in his own tux, watching me pace. "Nervous for Eli?"

"Eli's fine," I mutter, checking my watch. Again. 4:17. The ceremony starts at five. Guests are already arriving, filtering through the sprawling Hamptons estate gardens where white chairs wait in military precision. Where Savannah will sit. If she comes.

"Then what's got you wearing out Italian leather on hardwood?" My brother's eyes narrow slightly. Always watching. Always analyzing.

“Or should I ask who?”

I shoot him a look that would silence most people. Xander just raises an eyebrow.

“Family day,” I deflect, moving to the window. From here, I can see the entire back lawn of our family estate: the flower-draped pergola where Eli will marry Isla, the massive reception tent glowing with thousands of fairy lights, and the army of staff ensuring everything runs with clockwork precision.

And the driveway, where black town cars arrive in steady procession, disgorging Manhattan’s elite in designer formalwear.

I scan each arrival, looking for her.

“Your assistant seems to have made quite an impression.” Xander’s voice is casual. Too casual.

I turn slowly, keeping my expression neutral.

“Savannah?”

“Is there another assistant I should know about?” The corner of his mouth quirks. “The one who sorted out the permit issue in record time. The one whose name appears in your schedule more than strictly necessary.”

“She’s good at her job.”

“I’m sure she is.” He straightens, adjusting his tie. “Interesting choice of plus-one for a family wedding.”

There it is. The real point of this little brotherly chat.

“Is there something you want to ask me, Xander?” I lean back against the windowsill, arms crossed.

“Just making an observation.” He steps into the room, voice dropping slightly. “You’ve always been reckless, Bash. It’s part of your charm. But mixing business and pleasure—”

“Spare me the lecture.” I cut him off, tension coiling tight in my chest. “Especially from someone who married his co-CEO.”

“That was different.”

“Why? Because it was in Dad’s will? Because the board approved?” I push off from the windowsill, straightening to my full height. “Or because you’re the eldest, and I’m just the family fuckup?”

Xander’s expression softens, and somehow that’s worse than his judgment.

“You’re not a fuckup, Bash. You never were.” He sighs. “But you are impulsive. And if this assistant—”

“Savannah,” I correct, sharper than intended.

“If Savannah is just another conquest—”

“She’s not.”

The words hang between us. Simple. Unplanned. True in a way I wasn’t prepared to admit out loud.

Xander studies me, really looks at me, and whatever he sees makes him nod once.

“Then I suggest you make that clear. To her. To everyone.”

He turns to leave, pausing at the door.

“And Bash? Whatever this is, make sure it’s worth the complications that come with it.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me with the echo of a warning I’m already ignoring. Because I’ve spent the last week in agony, watching Savannah move through the office, efficient and untouchable. Working beside her, wanting her, restraining myself from pushing for more than the tentative truce we’ve established. All for tonight. For the moment when she walks into my world not as my employee, but as my choice.

If she comes.

The doubt gnaws at me. She agreed to be my date, yes. But that was before Wolfe’s latest project curveball, before the late nights and tense meetings, before she started

looking at me with that mix of want and wariness that drives me crazy.

I check my watch again. 4:23. Thirty-seven minutes until the ceremony.

Through the window, I spot another town car pulling up. The door opens, and—

Savannah.

My heart slams against my ribs. She steps out with characteristic grace, one hand holding the hem of a deep emerald dress that floats around her like water. Her hair is swept up, exposing the elegant line of her neck and curve of her shoulders.

She pauses, taking in the mansion, the grounds, and the fleet of luxury cars. For a moment, uncertainty flickers across her face, so brief I might have missed it if I hadn't been watching her like a drowning man watches the shore.

Then her chin lifts, spine straightening, and she follows the attendant toward the ceremony space.

Something hot and possessive unfurls in my chest. That's my girl. Walking into the lion's den without flinching.

I should be downstairs greeting her, showing her to her seat, making it clear to everyone that she's with me. Instead, I'm stuck up here, fulfilling groomsman duties as Eli fusses with his bow tie for the tenth time and our mother flutters around making last-minute adjustments no one asked for.

"Bash, there you are." Mom appears in the doorway, elegant in midnight blue, a strand of pearls at her throat that Dad gave her years ago. "Eli's asking for you. Something about the rings?"

"I've got them." I pat my pocket, feeling the weight of the platinum bands. "Is everything okay?"

"Just pre-wedding jitters." She steps closer, reaching up

to adjust my tie though it doesn't need it. A mother's habit. "You look handsome."

"Thanks, Mom." I tolerate her fussing, my mind still on Savannah, on where she's sitting, wondering if she feels welcome.

"I saw your guest arrive," Mom says casually, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle from my lapel. "The young woman from your office? She's lovely."

Of course she knows. Mom knows everything, sees everything, especially when it comes to her sons.

"Her name is Savannah," I say, watching her reaction carefully.

"Savannah," Mom repeats, testing the name. "Well, I've asked the staff to seat her in the family section. First row, with Reyna."

Surprise jolts through me. "You did?"

Her eyes, the same steel gray as mine, soften slightly.

"You invited her to your brother's wedding, Sebastian. That says something, whether you meant it to or not."

Before I can respond, she pats my cheek and turns toward the door.

"Now come along. Your brother needs you, and we don't want to keep the bride waiting."

I follow her down the hall, my thoughts spinning. Mom seated Savannah with family. With *family*. Not in the general guest section, not with the business associates but right up front where everyone will see her.

Where everyone will know she's important.

The next thirty minutes pass in a blur of last-minute adjustments and groom management. Eli paces, checks his watch, adjusts his cufflinks, and generally acts like he's heading to execution rather than marrying the woman he's been in love with since they met.

“You know she’s going to show up, right?” I say, handing him a glass of scotch.

He takes it gratefully. “Of course she will.”

“Then what’s with the nervous breakdown?”

Eli downs the scotch in one go.

“It’s not about her showing up, Bash. It’s about what happens after.”

“The *‘happily ever after’* part?” I raise an eyebrow. “Thought that was the goal.”

“It is.” He sets the glass down. “But what if I mess it up? What if I can’t be what she needs?”

I almost laugh, but the raw vulnerability in his eyes stops me. This is Eli, responsible, steady, always-has-a-plan Eli, terrified of failing at the one thing that matters most to him.

“You won’t,” I say simply. “Not because you’re perfect, but because you care enough to worry about it.”

He studies me for a moment, then nods, some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

“When did you get so wise about relationships?”

“I’m not.” I adjust his bow tie one last time. “Just smart enough to recognize the real thing when I see it.”

The words linger as we head downstairs, toward the ceremony, toward the rest of our lives.

I take my place at the altar beside Eli and Xander, scanning the rows of white chairs. The estate gardens have been transformed: white roses and greenery draped everywhere, crystal vases catching the late afternoon sunlight, a string quartet playing softly as two hundred of New York’s wealthiest and most powerful take their seats.

And there, in the front row, exactly where Mom said she’d be—Savannah.

The sight of her steals my breath. That emerald dress

hugs curves I've had my hands on, dips low enough in the back to reveal skin I've tasted. Her profile is serene, composed, as she chats with Reyna beside her.

She belongs here. In that moment, I know it with bone-deep certainty.

The music changes, and heads turn as Isla appears at the end of the aisle, radiant in white. But my eyes drift back to Savannah. As if sensing me, she looks up, straight at me.

Our gazes lock across the space, just like that first night at the hotel bar, just like that moment in my office before I kissed her, just like every time since when we've pretended we're nothing more than boss and assistant.

The hunger in her eyes mirrors my own, and something shifts between us. An acknowledgment. A promise.

Later, her slight smile seems to say.

Count on it, I answer silently.

The ceremony proceeds as planned. Eli and Isla exchange vows that sound suspiciously non-traditional (*definitely Isla's influence*), and I hand over the rings at the appropriate moment. When they're pronounced husband and wife, the crowd erupts in applause, and I catch Savannah wiping away a tear.

It's that small gesture, a glimpse of softness beneath her carefully maintained composure, that undoes me.

During the photographs, I find myself scanning the cocktail hour crowd, tracking her movements. She stands slightly apart, champagne flute in hand, watching the proceedings with observant eyes. Several guests give her curious glances, likely wondering who she is and why she's seated with family.

I should go to her. Want to go to her. But family photos drag on, and by the time we're released, she's disappeared into the reception tent.

“Your girl seems comfortable enough,” Xander comments as we head toward the tent. “Mom’s taken her under wing.”

I follow his gaze and spot them—my mother and Savannah, heads bent in conversation by one of the flower arrangements. Mom’s hand rests lightly on Savannah’s arm, and whatever she’s saying has Savannah smiling.

Relief and something warmer flood through me.

“She’s not my girl.” *Yet*, I add silently.

Xander gives me a knowing look. “If you say so.”

The reception unfolds in elegant Alderidge fashion: champagne flowing freely, gourmet food passed on silver trays, and the string quartet playing as twilight settles over the estate. I fulfill my groomsman duties with one eye always tracking Savannah.

She moves through the crowd with quiet confidence, speaking with Reyna, accepting introductions from Mom, even sharing a laugh with one of Isla’s friends. Yet I notice the subtle shifts, how certain groups fall silent when she approaches, how the Vanguard Club wives exchange glances behind their champagne flutes.

Old money recognizing an outsider.

My jaw tightens seeing these people, with their inherited wealth and carefully curated bloodlines, looking down on someone worth ten of them.

I’m making my way toward her when Eli intercepts me.

“Speech time, little brother. You’re up after Xander.”

Damn. I’d almost forgotten.

By the time the speeches end and the first dance begins, Savannah is nowhere to be seen. Frustration builds as I scan the room, nodding absently at congratulations, accepting handshakes from business associates.

“Looking for someone?” A familiar voice cuts through my thoughts.

I turn to find Catherine Winthrop-Hayes, socialite, board member, and notorious gossip, watching me with keen interest. Her daughter Elizabeth hovers at her elbow, all blonde hair and expectant smile.

“Catherine,” I acknowledge politely. “Elizabeth. Enjoying the wedding?”

“Absolutely divine,” Catherine purrs. “Your family always did know how to entertain. Though I’m surprised by some of the... guest choices.”

There it is. The first swipe.

“Oh?” I keep my tone casual, though my shoulders tense.

“Yes, I couldn’t help but notice your executive assistant. In the family section, no less.” Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “I hadn’t realized staff had been included in the invitation list.”

Elizabeth giggles softly beside her.

“The executive assistant’s done well for herself, hasn’t she? From employee to date in record time.”

Something cold and dangerous slides through my veins. I’ve known these women my entire life, attended the same schools, moved in the same circles. Once upon a time, Catherine had not-so-subtly pushed Elizabeth as a suitable match.

I lean in slightly, voice dropping to ensure only they hear me.

“She’s not my assistant tonight. She’s with me. Try again.”

Catherine’s eyes widen fractionally. Elizabeth’s smile falters.

“I see,” Catherine recovers quickly. “How... progressive of you.”

“Isn’t it?” I smile, all teeth and warning. “If you’ll excuse me.”

I leave them standing there, scanning the room with renewed purpose. Where is she? Did she overhear? Did someone else say something to drive her away?

Chapter Twelve

Bash

I find her outside on the stone terrace, away from the music and laughter. She stands at the balustrade, looking out over the gardens where lanterns now glow among the roses. The night breeze plays with loose tendrils of her hair, and moonlight casts her profile in silver.

For a moment, I just watch her, struck by how right she looks here, against the backdrop of my family home.

“You came,” I say finally, moving closer.

She turns, and the smile she gives me is genuine, if a little guarded.

“I said I would.”

“People don’t always keep their promises.” I join her at the balustrade, close enough to smell her perfume, citrus and something deeper, more complex.

“I do,” she says simply.

We stand in companionable silence, the sounds of the reception drifting out to us—music, laughter, the clink of glasses.

“Your mother is lovely,” Savannah offers after a moment. “She’s been very kind.”

“She likes you.” I turn to face her, drinking in details I’ve been starved for: the slight flush on her cheeks from champagne, the way the moonlight catches on her earrings, the pulse visible at the base of her throat. “Everyone does.”

She laughs softly.

“That’s a polite fiction. I’ve counted at least five society matrons who think I’m sleeping my way to the top.”

My jaw tightens. “Who said that?”

“No one needs to say it. It’s in the looks.” She shrugs, but I can see the tension in her shoulders. “I don’t belong here, Bash. We both know that.”

“You’re wrong.” I step closer, unable to maintain the careful distance I’ve been keeping all night. My hand finds hers on the stone, covering it gently.

“You belong exactly where you choose to be.”

She looks up at me, searching my face for... something. Sincerity? Deception? I hold her gaze, letting her see whatever truth she’s looking for.

“And if I choose to be here?” she asks, voice barely above a whisper. “With you?”

“Then I’d say the night just got a hell of a lot more interesting.” I brush a strand of hair from her cheek, my fingertips lingering against her skin.

The moment stretches between us, electric with possibility. Her lips part slightly, and I’m seconds away from kissing her, consequences be damned, when the French doors open behind us.

“There you are!” Isla’s friend—Marie? Maya?—calls out. “They’re cutting the cake. You’re wanted inside, Bash.”

Savannah steps back, putting appropriate distance between us. The moment breaks, but the electricity remains, crackling in the space between us.

“Save me a dance?” I ask, reluctant to leave.

She nods, composure back in place. “Go. Your brother needs you.”

Inside, the reception has reached that perfect point of celebration, with enough champagne flowing to loosen ties and inhibitions but not yet the messy stage that comes later. Eli and Isla cut the cake with obvious joy, feeding each other pieces with surprising restraint.

I make the appropriate noises, laugh at the appropriate jokes, but my attention continually drifts to Savannah. She’s rejoined the party, standing near Reyna as servers distribute cake. I watch as she laughs at something my sister-in-law says, head tilted back, completely uninhibited for a moment.

Beautiful.

The string quartet transitions from dinner music to dancing, and couples begin filling the floor. Eli leads Isla in their first dance as husband and wife, and I feel an unexpected pang watching them—so obviously in love, so certain of each other.

When was the last time I felt that sure of anything?

As the first dance ends and others join the floor, I make my way toward Savannah. She sees me coming, something flashing in her eyes. Anticipation, wariness, maybe heat.

“I believe you promised me a dance,” I say, extending my hand.

She places her hand in mine, cool fingers against my palm.

“I don’t recall promising anything.”

“Then consider it a request.” I lead her onto the dance floor, one hand settling at the small of her back, the other holding hers.

Her dress is smooth under my fingers, her body warm beneath it. We begin moving to the music—something slow

and classical that I don't recognize but appreciate for giving me an excuse to hold her close.

"Everyone's watching us," she murmurs, gaze flickering around the room.

"Let them." My thumb traces small circles against her back. "I'm not hiding you, Savannah."

Her eyes snap to mine, searching.

"What is this, Bash? What are we doing here?"

The question is loaded with all the things we've been dancing around for weeks. The kiss. The slap. The tension that builds every time we're alone together. The fact that I invited her to my brother's wedding, a family event, not a business function.

"I'm not sure," I answer honestly. "But I know I wanted you here. With me. Not as my assistant."

"As what, then?" She's challenging me now, demanding clarity I'm not sure I can give.

Because how do I explain that I've never brought a date to a family wedding before? That watching her navigate my world with such grace makes me want things I've never wanted? That the thought of her leaving, going back to being just my assistant, or worse, leaving the company altogether, fills me with a dread I can't name?

"As mine," I say finally, the words coming from some place deeper than thought.

I feel her inhale sharply, her step faltering slightly before she recovers. For a terrifying moment, I think she'll pull away, slap me again, tell me I've crossed a line.

Instead, she moves imperceptibly closer, her body softening against mine.

"That's a dangerous thing to say," she whispers, her breath warm against my neck.

"I'm a dangerous man." My hand splays wider against her back, holding her to me.

She laughs softly, the sound vibrating through both of us.

"Is this how you charm all your conquests? With possessive declarations on dance floors?"

"You're not a conquest, Savannah." I pull back enough to meet her eyes, needing her to see the truth. "And I've never said that to anyone before."

Something shifts in her expression, surprise, vulnerability, and underneath it all, a heat that matches my own.

"I should be running from you," she admits, voice low enough that only I can hear.

"Why aren't you?"

"I wish I knew."

We continue dancing, moving together with an ease that feels practiced, familiar. Her hand in mine, her body following my lead, is intoxicating in a way no alcohol has ever been.

Across the floor, I catch Xander watching us, his expression unreadable. Next to him, Mom smiles approvingly. Eli, dancing with Isla nearby, shoots me a questioning look that I answer with a slight nod.

Yes, this matters. Yes, she's important. Yes, I know what I'm doing.

Even if that last part isn't entirely true.

As the song ends, I don't immediately release her. Instead, I lean closer, my lips brushing her ear.

"Come with me," I murmur. "There's something I want to show you."

She hesitates only briefly before nodding. I lead her from the dance floor, my hand still at the small of her back, guiding her through the crowd. We garner looks ranging

from speculative, curious, to judgmental, but I ignore them all.

Let them talk. Let them wonder. Let them see exactly who I've chosen to have at my side tonight.

We slip out through a side door, away from the main terrace, and into the quieter part of the gardens. Night has fully fallen now, and the path is lit only by small lanterns placed at intervals, casting golden pools of light among the shadows.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her heels clicking softly on the stone path.

"Somewhere quiet."

I lead her deeper into the gardens, past manicured hedges and slumbering flower beds, to a small clearing with a stone bench. Above us, stars pierce the velvet darkness, far clearer here than in the city.

"The secret garden," I explain, gesturing to the enclosed space. "My mother's private project. It's at its best in the spring, but even now..."

"It's beautiful," she says softly, turning in a slow circle to take it all in.

And she's right. Even in the dim light, there's magic here: the whisper of leaves, the distant sound of the ocean, the scent of late roses still lingering in the air.

But I'm not looking at the garden. I'm looking at her and the elegant line of her neck as she tilts her head back to see the stars, at the way moonlight turns her skin to pearl, at the perfect curve of her lips.

She catches me staring and stills. "Bash..."

Whatever she was going to say dies as I close the distance between us, one hand cupping her cheek, the other settling at her waist.

"Tell me to stop," I murmur, giving her the chance to

pull away, to maintain the professional fiction we've been hiding behind.

She doesn't. Instead, her hands come up to rest on my chest, fingers curling slightly into the fabric of my tux.

"I can't," she whispers, and it sounds like surrender.

I kiss her then, finally, after days of wanting, of remembering, of dreaming about the taste of her. Her lips are soft, yielding, opening under mine with a sigh that goes straight to my core. Unlike our first kiss since she re-entered my life—rushed, heated, ending in that slap—this one builds slowly, deepening by degrees, each shift and press a question and answer between us.

Her arms slide up around my neck, pulling me closer. My hands span her waist, feeling the warmth of her through the thin dress fabric. She tastes like champagne and possibility, and I'm drunk on both.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I rest my forehead against hers, unwilling to let her go completely.

"I've been wanting to do that again since the moment you ran out of my office," I admit.

Her laugh is shaky. "Even after I slapped you?"

"Especially after that." I brush my thumb across her lower lip. "No one challenges me like you do, Savannah. No one makes me feel so... awake."

She pulls back slightly, searching my face in the dim light.

"This is complicated, Bash. You're my boss. I'm your—"

"Assistant," I finish. "Yes. And that matters Monday through Friday, nine to five. But right now? Right here?" I gesture to the garden, the night, the space that feels separate from everything else. "It's just us."

“Just us,” she repeats, testing the words. “Is that even possible?”

I wish I could promise her it is. Wish I could say with certainty that we can navigate this, whatever this is, without consequences. But I’ve never been one for false assurances.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “But I want to find out.”

She studies me for a long moment, weighing something in her mind. I wait, giving her the space to decide, to choose.

Finally, she nods, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“Then I guess we’re finding out together.”

Relief and desire surge through me in equal measure. I pull her close again, claiming her mouth with mine, pouring weeks of restraint and wanting into the kiss. She meets me with equal fervor, her body arching against mine, her hands in my hair.

We lose ourselves in each other, in the darkness and privacy of the garden, in the heat building between us. Savannah Bishop, my assistant, my enigma, my obsession, gives herself to me with an abandon that matches my own.

Later, much later, we return to the reception. Her lipstick has been kissed away, her hair slightly mussed despite my attempts to fix it. My bow tie hangs undone around my neck, my collar open.

As we rejoin the celebration, heads turn. Eyebrows raise. Whispers follow us.

But Savannah walks beside me with her chin high, her hand in mine. No longer trying to blend in or fade to the background. No longer just my assistant.

Across the room, I spot Catherine and Elizabeth watching us, their expressions a mix of surprise and calculation. I meet Catherine’s gaze directly, my arm sliding

around Savannah's waist in a gesture that can't be misinterpreted.

Yes, she's with me. Yes, this is real. Yes, I've made my choice.

Catherine's lips thin, but she offers a tight nod of acknowledgment. Message received.

As the night progresses, I keep Savannah close. We dance again, drink champagne, and laugh with Eli and Isla. I introduce her to business associates, to distant cousins, to childhood friends, no longer as "my assistant" but simply as "Savannah," letting her name stand on its own.

And through it all, I watch her. Watch her laugh with Isla like they're old friends. Watch her charm the bartender into making her a special cocktail. Watch her fit into my world with an ease that feels both surprising and inevitable.

That's when it hits me, with the force of absolute certainty: *I don't want a night. I don't want a fling. I want her name linked with mine. I want her in my life, in my home, in my future.*

The realization should terrify me. Instead, it settles something restless deep in my chest.

As the evening winds down and guests begin to depart, I find myself at the bar with Eli, watching Savannah and Isla in animated conversation by the dance floor.

"She's different," Eli observes, following my gaze. "Your assistant."

"Savannah," I correct automatically.

He smiles. "Savannah," he amends. "She's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Someone more... temporary." He shrugs. "But the way you look at her..."

Lily Rae

I tear my eyes away from Savannah to look at my brother.

“How do I look at her?”

Eli’s smile widens.

“Like she’s a puzzle you’re still figuring out. Like you can’t quite believe she’s real.” He claps me on the shoulder.

“Like I look at Isla.”

Before I can respond, Isla calls him over, and he leaves me with those words echoing in my head.

Chapter Thirteen

Savannah

The Alderidge estate gardens shimmer like something out of a fairy tale after midnight. Silver moonlight spills across manicured hedges, and fairy lights strung through the branches create a canopy of artificial stars. I wander through it all, my emerald dress rustling against the stone path, feeling like an imposter in a world I don't belong in.

Behind me, the reception continues, with the last hardy guests dancing to jazz melodies and champagne still flowing, though the bride and groom disappeared an hour ago to begin their honeymoon. I should leave too. Call a car and disappear before I do something I can't take back.

But I can't bring myself to go.

The night air caresses my bare shoulders, cool enough to raise goosebumps but not enough to drive me back inside. I follow the winding path deeper into the gardens, away from the lights and laughter, until I find a small, intimate clearing with a stone bench. I sink onto it, kicking off my heels and letting my toes curl into the soft grass.

For just a moment, I want to exist in this suspended reality where I'm not Savannah Bishop, blackmailed spy,

but simply a woman in a beautiful dress at the end of a beautiful night.

I close my eyes and breathe in the scent of roses and salt air. The Hamptons estate sits close enough to the ocean that I can hear the distant rhythm of waves breaking against the shore. It's peaceful. Perfect.

A lie.

Because nothing about tonight is simple. Not the way Bash looked at me during that dance, like I was something precious and rare. Not the way his family welcomed me, his mother's gentle hand on my arm, Reyna's conspiratorial smiles, the way they all made space for me in their world without question.

And certainly not the two missed calls from Wolfe glowing on my phone.

I'd silenced it after the first, unable to bear the reality of what I'm doing here, what I'm risking, what I'm betraying. Because tonight, for the first time, I'm not just pretending to be drawn to Bash.

I'm falling. Hard and fast and terribly real.

The sound of footsteps on the stone path makes me open my eyes. I don't need to turn to know who it is. My body recognizes him now, the cadence of his walk, the energy that seems to shift the air around him.

"Hiding?" Bash's voice is soft, tinged with amusement.

"Breathing," I correct, not turning yet.

He steps into my field of vision, bow tie hanging loose around his neck, top buttons undone. The formal armor of the evening has been slowly discarded, leaving him looking disheveled and impossibly handsome in the moonlight.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks, gesturing to the space beside me on the bench.

I should say yes. Should invent a headache, claim

exhaustion, call that car and go home to my tiny Brooklyn apartment where I can pretend that none of this affects me.

Instead, I shift over, making room.

He sits beside me, his thigh a warm line against mine, and tilts his head back to look at the stars. For a long moment, neither of us speaks. The silence between us isn't awkward; it's charged, alive with all the things we aren't saying.

"Thank you for coming tonight," he says finally.

I turn to look at him, studying his profile.

"Thank you for inviting me."

"Even though you spent half the night dodging society matrons who were trying to figure out exactly what you are to me?"

His mouth quirks upward.

I laugh softly.

"Even then." I pause, hesitating before adding, "Your mother told me I was the first date you've ever brought to a family event."

His eyes find mine, steady and unreadable in the dim light.

"She's right."

"Why me?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

Bash studies me for a long moment, his gaze moving over my face like he's memorizing every detail.

"Because I can't stop thinking about you," he finally admits. "Because you challenge me. Because when you walked into my office that first day, pretending we hadn't met, I knew I wanted another chance."

My heart stutters in my chest.

"Another chance at what?"

"At this." He gestures between us. "At whatever this is becoming."

From the distant reception tent, the soft notes of jazz drift through the night air. The band has switched to something slow and dreamy, saxophone and piano weaving together into something that sounds like longing.

Bash stands and extends his hand to me.

“One more dance?”

I stare at his outstretched hand, knowing that if I take it, I’m crossing a line I’ve been carefully avoiding since that kiss in his office. This isn’t work. This isn’t pretense. This is a choice, made with clear eyes and full awareness of what it might mean.

His hand remains steady, waiting. Not demanding or pressuring, just offering.

I place my hand in his, feeling the warmth of his palm against mine as he helps me to my feet.

“I left my shoes,” I murmur, glancing at the heels discarded by the bench.

“You don’t need them.” His smile is gentle as he draws me into his arms, one hand settling at the small of my back, the other still holding mine.

We begin to sway, barely moving, more standing in place with subtle shifts of weight than actually dancing. My bare feet brush through the cool grass, his shoes occasionally brushing against my toes. The fairy lights strung through the trees cast dappled shadows across his face, highlighting the strong line of his jaw and the intensity in his eyes as he looks down at me.

Everything about this moment feels fragile, suspended, like we’re balanced on the edge of something that could shatter with a single wrong word.

“You fit here,” he says quietly, his thumb tracing small circles against the bare skin of my back where my dress dips low.

“In your arms?” The words come out more vulnerable than I intended.

His smile deepens.

“There, yes. But I meant here, in my world. With my family. You belonged tonight, Savannah. Whether you believe it or not.”

The sincerity in his voice makes my chest ache. Because he’s wrong. I don’t belong here, in this world of old money and power. I don’t belong with him, not when I’m lying with every breath, not when Wolfe holds my mother’s future in his hands. But for tonight, I desperately want to pretend.

“Your mother told me about this garden,” I say, changing the subject. “She said your father planted these roses for her when they were first married.”

Bash nods, his eyes softening.

“He did. Thirty-seven years later, she still comes here to sit with her coffee every morning when we’re at the estate. Says she can feel him here.”

“You miss him.” It’s not a question.

“Every day.” His hand tightens slightly on mine. “He wasn’t perfect, far from it. But he believed in me when no one else did. Left me the Imperial Club when everyone thought he’d give it to Xander.”

I hear the echo of old pain there, the shadow of being the “*wild*” brother, the one no one took seriously.

“He must have seen something in you that others missed,” I say softly.

Bash’s eyes find mine, something vulnerable flickering in their depths.

“He said I had vision. That I could see possibilities others couldn’t.” His mouth quirks in a half-smile. “Then

again, he also said I had my head too far up my ass to use it properly.”

I laugh, the sound startling in the quiet garden.

“Sounds like he knew you well.”

“Better than I knew myself, sometimes.” Bash’s expression grows thoughtful. “He would have liked you.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can. You don’t back down. You see through bullshit. You work harder than anyone I’ve ever met.” His thumb brushes my cheek, sending a shiver down my spine. “And you’ve been looking at me like that all night.”

My breath catches. “Like what?”

“Like you’re about to do something reckless.”

His voice drops lower, a rough edge to it that makes heat pool in my stomach.

And maybe he’s right. Maybe I am.

Because in this moment, with the music drifting through the night air and his arms around me, I can’t remember all the reasons this is a terrible idea. Can’t focus on anything but the warmth of his body against mine, the intensity in his eyes, the way his lips part slightly as I step closer.

“Maybe I am,” I whisper, my breath warm against his jaw.

Time seems to slow as I rise up on my toes, eliminating the last inches between us. My hand slides up his chest to his shoulder, feeling the solid strength of him beneath my palm. His breath hitches, but he doesn’t move, letting me lead, letting me choose. And I choose him.

I press my lips to his, a kiss that’s not desperate or teasing, but honest. A confession without words. His arms tighten around me, pulling me flush against him as he

responds with equal honesty, deepening the kiss with a reverence that makes my heart stutter.

This isn't seduction; it's surrender. Mine, his, ours.

His hands frame my face as we break apart, both breathing hard. His thumbs trace my cheekbones, and there's wonder in his eyes as he looks at me.

"Savannah," he says, just my name, but it sounds like a promise.

I should be terrified. Should be calculating risks, planning damage control, remembering my obligations to Wolfe, to my mother, to my own survival. But in this moment, with Bash looking at me like I'm something precious, I can't bring myself to care about anything beyond this garden, this night, this man.

"I want this," I admit, the words barely audible. "I want you."

The hunger that flashes in his eyes makes me shiver, but he doesn't rush, doesn't push. Instead, he kisses me again, slower this time, deeper, like he's learning the shape of my mouth, the taste of my surrender.

When we finally break apart, his forehead rests against mine, our breathing synchronized in the quiet night.

"Stay with me tonight," he says, not a command but a question. Another choice being offered.

I should say no, draw the line here, preserve some semblance of professional boundaries, protect what little remains of my heart.

Instead, I nod.

His smile is slow and bright enough to rival the fairy lights overhead. He takes my hand, intertwining our fingers, and leads me back to retrieve my discarded shoes. I slip them on, suddenly feeling the chill of the night air against my heated skin.

Bash shrugs out of his jacket and drapes it around my shoulders. The fabric is warm from his body, carrying his scent, expensive cologne, champagne, and something else that makes my heart race.

We walk hand in hand through the gardens, back toward the main house where most of the family is staying. The reception is winding down now, just a handful of guests remaining, the band playing their final set. No one seems to notice us slipping away, or if they do, they're discreet enough to pretend otherwise.

Bash's driver is waiting with the car, engine idling softly in the circular driveway. The man opens the door without comment, his expression professionally neutral as Bash helps me inside, his hand lingering at my waist.

As the car pulls away from the Alderidge estate, reality threatens to intrude. Questions crowd my mind: what happens Monday morning? What am I going to tell Wolfe? How long can I keep pretending that this isn't going to end in disaster?

But then Bash's arm slides around my shoulders, pulling me gently against his side, and I let my head rest on his shoulder, my eyes fluttering closed as his lips press a kiss to my temple.

"You okay?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Yes," I answer, and in this moment, it's not a lie.

The city lights are distant glimmers on the horizon as we speed toward Manhattan. Toward whatever comes next. Toward a line I'm about to cross with no way back.

And still, I can't bring myself to regret it.

Bash's hand finds mine in the darkness of the car, our fingers intertwining on the seat between us. His thumb traces slow circles against my palm, a gesture both soothing and electric.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, his voice low in the quiet car.

I could lie. Could say something light and simple. Instead, I give him a piece of truth.

“That I’m terrified.”

His hand tightens on mine. “Of me?”

“Of this,” I correct, gesturing vaguely between us. “Of what happens when the sun comes up and we have to be boss and assistant again.”

Bash is quiet for a moment, considering.

“We don’t have to label it right now,” he says finally. “Tonight is just... tonight. We’ll figure out the rest as we go.”

It’s a reasonable answer. A mature one, even. But it doesn’t address the real issue, that every moment I spend with him digs me deeper into a hole I won’t be able to climb out of. That eventually, Wolfe will ask for something I can’t give or Bash will discover the truth, and everything will come crashing down.

But those are tomorrow’s problems.

“Tonight is tonight,” I agree, letting myself sink deeper into his embrace.

The lights of the city grow larger as we approach, the familiar skyline a reminder that we’re returning to reality, to complications, to the mess I’ve made of everything. But Bash’s arm around me feels like an anchor, keeping me moored in this moment, in this choice.

As we cross the bridge into Manhattan, Bash shifts, turning to face me. In the intermittent glow of streetlights, his expression is tender and serious.

“Whatever happens tomorrow, I want you to know something,” he says, his voice low and certain. “This isn’t casual for me. You aren’t casual for me.”

The words hit me with physical force, stealing my

breath. Because despite everything, the complications, the lies between us, the inevitable fallout, I know he's telling the truth. And worse, I know I feel the same.

"It's not casual for me either," I admit, the words barely audible over the hum of the engine.

His smile is slow and beautiful, transforming his face from handsome to breathtaking. He leans in, kissing me with such gentle intensity that tears prick behind my eyelids.

He kisses me like I'm the future he never thought he'd have. And I kiss him like I might be willing to believe it.

The car slows as we enter the city proper, navigating through late-night traffic toward wherever Bash calls home. Each block brings us closer to a night I can't take back, a choice with consequences I can't fully predict.

But as Bash's hand squeezes mine, as his eyes promise things we've both been too careful to say out loud, I know I won't change my mind. For tonight, at least, I'm allowing myself this, whatever joy can be stolen before reality comes crashing back.

Tomorrow I'll have to face what I've done, what I'm still doing.

But tonight? Tonight belongs to us.

Chapter Fourteen

Bash

The elevator doors slide closed behind us, sealing out the real world. Savannah stands just inside my penthouse, still wrapped in my jacket, her emerald dress catching the city lights streaming through the windows.

Her fingers trail along the marble countertop of my kitchen island as she takes in the space, the open-concept living area, the panoramic view of Manhattan's skyline, all the minimalist luxury I've cultivated as my sanctuary.

But I can't focus on any of it. All I see is her.

"Drink?" I ask, voice rougher than I intended.

She turns, those hazel-green eyes catching mine.

"No." A single word, but loaded with meaning. Her gaze doesn't waver. "I don't want anything between us tonight."

Something primal shifts in my chest. The air between us charges with electricity, with intention. With inevitability.

I cross to her in three long strides. My hands find her waist, drawing her against me as I back her into the counter. Her breath hitches, eyes dilating as she looks up at me.

“Last chance to walk away,” I murmur, giving her one final opportunity to change her mind. To remember all the reasons this is a terrible idea.

“Once I start, Savannah, I won’t stop.”

Her answer is to drop my jacket from her shoulders, letting it pool at her feet. Her hands slide up my chest, fingers working at my bow tie until it falls away.

“I don’t want you to stop.”

The last thread of my control snaps.

I capture her mouth with mine, no longer gentle, no longer patient. This kiss is hungry, desperate, consuming. My tongue slides against hers as I lift her onto the counter, stepping between her thighs as they part for me. Her dress rides up, revealing smooth skin that my hands can’t resist exploring.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, nails scraping my scalp as she pulls me closer, arching into me. Every barrier between us—professional, emotional, physical—dissolves in the heat of our connection. This isn’t our first time together, but it feels new. Raw. Real in a way that night at the Regent never was.

“Bedroom,” she gasps against my mouth as my lips trail down her neck, finding that spot just below her ear that makes her shiver.

“Too far,” I growl, hands already bunching her dress at her hips. “Need you now.”

Her laugh is breathy, half-strangled with desire. “Impatient?”

I pull back just enough to meet her gaze, letting her see exactly how serious I am.

“I’ve wanted you since the moment you walked into my office. Since before that.” My thumb traces her lower lip, still swollen from my kisses. “I’ve spent weeks watching

you, wanting you, imagining all the ways I'd have you when you finally stopped fighting this."

Her pupils dilate further, the green of her irises nearly swallowed by black.

"Show me."

Challenge accepted.

I capture her mouth again, my hands finding the zipper at the back of her dress. It slides down easily, revealing smooth skin I can't wait to taste. I push the straps from her shoulders, letting the emerald fabric pool at her waist. She's wearing a strapless black bra that contrasts beautifully with her skin, her breasts rising and falling with each rapid breath.

"Fucking perfect," I murmur, tracing the edge of the lace with my fingertip. I watch goosebumps rise in the wake of my touch, her nipples hardening beneath the thin fabric. "Every inch of you."

Her hands aren't idle. She's unbuttoning my shirt with surprising dexterity, pushing it off my shoulders until I'm bare-chested before her. Her palms slide over my skin, exploring the planes of my chest, the ridges of muscle at my abdomen. When her fingers drop to my belt, my cock throbs in anticipation.

"Not yet," I catch her wrists, pinning them gently at her sides. "I want to taste you first."

Her eyes widen, a flush spreading across her chest and up her neck. I keep my gaze locked on hers as I reach behind her, unclasping her bra with practiced ease. It falls away, leaving her breasts exposed to my hungry gaze. They're fuller than I remembered, perfect handfuls tipped with dusky rose nipples that beg for attention.

"God, look at you," I breathe, reverence mixing with

raw hunger in my voice. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

She starts to shake her head, but I don’t let her finish. I lower my mouth to her breast, drawing her nipple between my lips. Her back arches off the counter as I suck, my tongue circling the sensitive peak while my hand cups her other breast, thumb brushing over the neglected nipple.

“Bash,” she gasps, my name a plea and a prayer on her lips. Her hands find my hair again, holding me against her as if afraid I might stop.

But I have no intention of stopping. Not when she’s making those little whimpering sounds that go straight to my cock. Not when her thighs are trembling around my hips, trying to pull me closer. Not when I can feel the heat of her through the thin fabric of her panties, pressed against my straining erection.

I switch to her other breast, lavishing it with the same attention while my hand slides up her inner thigh. She’s trembling now, anticipation and desire making her muscles tense as my fingers trace higher, brushing against the edge of her panties.

“Please,” she whispers, hips lifting slightly off the counter, seeking contact.

I smile against her skin, trailing kisses down the valley between her breasts, across her ribs, to the soft skin of her stomach.

“Please what, Savannah?” My fingers continue their teasing path, tracing the edge of the lace without giving her what she wants.

“Tell me what you need.”

Her eyes lock with mine, pupils blown wide with desire.

“Touch me,” she demands, voice husky. “I need your hands on me. Your mouth on me.”

The raw honesty in her voice nearly undoes me. I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties, dragging them slowly down her thighs as I sink to my knees before her. She lifts her hips to help me, and I slide the lace all the way off, letting it join the growing pile of discarded clothing on my kitchen floor.

And then she’s bare before me, perched on my kitchen counter with her dress bunched around her waist, legs parted just enough to reveal the glistening evidence of her arousal. It’s the single most erotic sight I’ve ever seen.

I press kisses to the inside of her knee, working my way up her inner thigh with deliberate slowness. Her breathing quickens, her hands braced on the counter edge as she watches me through heavy-lidded eyes. When I reach the juncture of her thighs, I pause, my breath hot against her most sensitive flesh.

“Bash,” she whimpers, a note of frustration in her voice. “Don’t tease.”

I smile up at her, meeting her gaze as I slowly, deliberately lick a path through her folds. The taste of her explodes across my tongue, sweet, tangy, addictive. Her head falls back on a gasp, thighs tensing around me.

“Fuck,” she breathes, the profanity somehow more erotic coming from her usually controlled mouth.

I take my time exploring her, learning what makes her gasp, what makes her moan, what makes her fingers tighten in my hair almost to the point of pain. When I finally circle her clit with my tongue, she cries out, the sound echoing through my penthouse.

“That’s it,” I encourage, sliding one finger inside her

while my tongue continues its lazy circles. “Let me hear you.”

She’s gloriously responsive, her body arching and twisting as I add a second finger, curling them to find that spot inside her that makes her thighs tremble. Her walls clench around my fingers, her breathing coming in sharp pants as I increase the pressure of my tongue against her clit.

“Bash, I’m—“ she starts, voice breaking on a gasp as I suck her clit between my lips. “Oh God, I’m going to—“

“Come for me,” I command, my voice rough with desire. “Let go, Savannah. I want to taste you.”

The combination of my words and the steady rhythm of my fingers and tongue pushes her over the edge. She comes with a cry, her body convulsing around my fingers, her thighs clamping around my head as pleasure crashes through her. I work her through it, gentling my touch as she rides out the aftershocks, until she pushes weakly at my shoulder.

“Too much,” she gasps, oversensitive.

I press one last kiss to her inner thigh before rising, my knees protesting the hard kitchen floor. Her eyes are glazed, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted as she tries to catch her breath. She’s never looked more beautiful.

“Bedroom,” I say, no longer a question. I lift her from the counter, her legs wrapping automatically around my waist as I carry her through my penthouse. She weighs almost nothing in my arms, her body still trembling slightly from her orgasm.

My bedroom is cast in shadows, the only light coming from the city beyond the windows. I lay her on my bed, watching as she stretches languidly across the dark sheets.

Her dress is still bunched around her waist, and I tug it down her legs, leaving her completely naked before me.

“Your turn,” she says, pushing herself up on her elbows. “I want to see you.”

I’ve never been self-conscious about my body, but something about the hunger in her gaze makes me feel exposed in a way that goes beyond physical nakedness. Still, I obey, unbuckling my belt and pushing my pants and boxers down in one smooth motion.

My cock springs free, hard and aching, the tip already glistening with precum. Savannah’s eyes widen, her tongue darting out to wet her lips in a gesture that sends a fresh surge of blood southward.

“Come here,” she whispers, reaching for me.

I crawl onto the bed, covering her body with mine, careful to keep most of my weight on my forearms. The feeling of her naked beneath me, skin to skin, is intoxicating. I capture her mouth in another searing kiss, groaning as her hands explore my back, my shoulders, my ass, pulling me closer until my cock is pressed against the wet heat of her center.

“Condom,” she gasps against my mouth.

I reach for the nightstand drawer, fumbling for a moment before my fingers close around a foil packet. Savannah takes it from me, tearing it open with her teeth in a gesture so unexpectedly sexy that I nearly lose control right then.

“Let me,” she murmurs, pushing at my shoulder until I roll onto my back.

She straddles my thighs, her hair falling around her face as she takes my cock in her hand, stroking it slowly from base to tip. I hiss through my teeth at the sensation, hips bucking involuntarily into her touch.

“Easy,” she teases, her smile wicked in the dim light. “We’re just getting started.”

She rolls the condom down my length with torturous slowness, her eyes never leaving mine. When it’s securely in place, she shifts, positioning herself above me, the tip of my cock nudging against her entrance.

“Savannah,” I groan, hands finding her hips. “Please.”

She sinks down slowly, taking me inch by inch, her body stretching to accommodate my size. The feeling is exquisite, tight, hot, perfect. When she’s fully seated, she pauses, adjusting to the fullness, her inner walls pulsing around me in a way that makes it hard to maintain control.

“You feel so good,” she breathes, rotating her hips experimentally. The movement sends sparks of pleasure up my spine.

“So deep like this.”

I grip her hips tighter, guiding her into a rhythm that has us both gasping. She braces her hands on my chest, using the leverage to ride me with increasing confidence. Her breasts bounce with each movement, her head thrown back in abandon, her lips parted on silent moans.

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

“That’s it,” I encourage, meeting her movements with upward thrusts that hit deeper, harder. “Ride my cock, Savannah. Take what you need.”

Her rhythm falters at my words, her eyes flying open to meet mine.

“Say that again,” she demands, her voice husky with desire.

I smile, recognizing the spark of arousal my dirty talk ignited.

“You like that? Like when I tell you how good you feel

on my cock? How perfect your pussy is, gripping me so tight I can barely think?"

A moan escapes her, her movements growing more erratic.

"Yes," she admits, a fresh flush spreading across her chest. "Don't stop."

"I love watching you like this," I continue, one hand sliding from her hip to where we're joined, my thumb finding her clit. "So beautiful, so desperate for me. I can feel how wet you are, how much you want this. Want me."

Her walls clench around me at my words, her breathing coming faster. I increase the pressure on her clit, circling it with my thumb as she rides me harder, chasing her release.

"That's it, sweetheart," I encourage, feeling my own climax building at the base of my spine. "Come for me again. Want to feel you come on my cock."

She breaks with a cry, her body convulsing around me, her nails digging into my chest as pleasure overwhelms her. The sight of her coming undone, combined with the rhythmic pulsing of her inner walls, pushes me over the edge. I thrust up once, twice, and then I'm coming, my world narrowing to the sensation of release and the woman on top of me.

For a long moment, we stay like that, joined and trembling, our breathing gradually slowing as we come down from the high. Savannah collapses onto my chest, her hair tickling my chin, her body still occasionally trembling with aftershocks.

I wrap my arms around her, holding her close as our heartbeats synchronize. The weight of her on me feels right in a way I'm not ready to examine too closely. Instead, I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of

her floral shampoo, a hint of sweat, a combination that I'm quickly becoming addicted to.

"That was..." she starts, then trails off, apparently unable to find the right word.

I chuckle, the sound rumbling through my chest.

"Yeah," I agree. "It was."

She shifts, lifting herself off me with a small gasp at the sensation of emptiness. I dispose of the condom quickly, then return to find her already curled on her side, watching me with heavy-lidded eyes. I slide back into bed, pulling her against me, her back to my chest, my arm draped possessively over her waist.

"Stay," I murmur against her neck, not quite a question, not quite a command.

She tenses slightly, and for a moment I think she might pull away. But then she relaxes into me, her hand finding mine where it rests against her stomach.

"Okay," she whispers, the single word holding more significance than it should.

I press a kiss to the nape of her neck, allowing myself to savor this moment of peace before reality intrudes again. Tomorrow we'll have to face what this means for us, for work, and for everything that comes next.

But right now, with Savannah warm and pliant in my arms, her breathing already evening out as sleep claims her, I can't bring myself to worry about any of it. For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel... content. Like a piece of myself I didn't know was missing has finally clicked into place.

I close my eyes, letting the rhythm of her breathing lull me toward sleep. Whatever comes next, we'll face it together. One way or another, Savannah Bishop has become essential to me. And I don't intend to let her go.

Empire of Desire

As I drift off, my mind offers up one final, startling thought:

I could fall in love with this woman.

The realization should terrify me. Instead, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter Fifteen

Bash

I wake to gold light filtering through half-drawn curtains and the unfamiliar weight of another body in my bed. Not unfamiliar in the broader sense—I've had women in my bed before—but unfamiliar in this specific, heart-stopping way.

Savannah.

She sleeps with her back to me, dark hair spilled across my pillow like liquid night. One arm is tucked beneath her cheek, the other stretches across the mattress, fingers loosely curled. The sheet has slipped down, revealing the smooth curve of her shoulder, the elegant line of her spine. I resist the urge to trace it with my fingertips.

Instead, I simply watch her. The steady rise and fall of her breathing. The way the morning light catches on her skin, turning it to honey. The small, almost imperceptible movements as she dreams.

I've never done this before. Never lingered in the quiet moments after. Never savored the simple fact of someone else's presence. It's always been about the release, the temporary connection, the eventual goodbye.

This feels different. Dangerous.

Better.

Something shifts in her breathing, a small hitch, a change in rhythm. I recognize the signs of waking and close my eyes, feigning sleep. I'm not ready for this moment to end. Not ready to face whatever comes next.

The mattress dips as she moves. Slowly, carefully, as if trying not to wake me. I keep my breathing even, my face relaxed. Through barely-open eyelids, I watch her sit up, sheet clutched to her chest, surveying the room. Looking for her clothes, I realize. Planning her escape.

Just like last time.

"Going somewhere?" My voice is rough with sleep, lower than usual.

She startles, shoulders tensing before she turns to face me. For a brief moment, her expression is unguarded, soft, almost vulnerable, before the familiar mask slides back into place.

"I should get home," she says, not quite meeting my eyes. "I need to change before work."

I prop myself up on one elbow, letting the sheet pool around my waist.

"You could call in sick."

A small smile plays at the corners of her mouth.

"To my boss? Who happens to be right here?"

"Exactly. Consider it approved."

She shakes her head, but the smile lingers.

"Some of us take our jobs seriously, Alderidge."

"I take plenty of things seriously," I counter, reaching out to catch her wrist before she can slide out of bed. "You, for instance."

Her pulse jumps beneath my fingers. "Bash..."

"You don't run this time," I say, the words somewhere

between a request and a command. “Last time, you left me a note. This time, you stay for breakfast.”

Something flickers in her eyes, hesitation, maybe, or conflict, but she doesn’t pull away.

“I don’t think you have anything edible in this apartment.”

I grin, releasing her wrist to throw back the covers.

“Challenge accepted.”

I climb out of bed, making no effort to cover myself as I cross to the dresser and pull out a pair of sweatpants. I can feel her eyes on me, taking inventory of the marks she left on my back, the muscles shifting beneath my skin. When I turn, her gaze snaps up to my face, color rising in her cheeks.

“Enjoying the view?” I ask, not bothering to hide my smirk as I step into the sweatpants.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she retorts, but there’s no heat in it.

I cross back to the bed, leaning down until my face is level with hers.

“Liar,” I murmur, placing a quick kiss on her forehead before straightening.

“There’s a robe in the bathroom if you want it. Or you can borrow a shirt. Whatever makes you comfortable.”

I don’t wait for her response, padding barefoot out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. It’s a space I rarely use; most of my meals are delivered or eaten out, but I know the basics. Eggs in the fridge, bread in the freezer (*less likely to go bad that way*), coffee beans in the pantry.

I start with the coffee, grinding the beans and measuring them into the filter. The familiar ritual grounds me and gives my hands something to do. By the time Savannah

appears in the doorway, I've got coffee brewing and eggs whisked in a bowl, ready for the pan.

She's wearing my shirt from last night, the white fabric falling to mid-thigh. Her legs are bare, her feet too, hair slightly tousled from sleep. She looks both impossibly sexy and strangely vulnerable, standing there in my kitchen, in my clothes.

"Can I help?" she asks, hovering uncertainly by the counter.

I shake my head. "Sit. Let me do this."

She raises an eyebrow. "You cook?"

"I can manage eggs and toast." I crack a smile. "No promises on the quality, but it'll be edible."

She slides onto one of the barstools at the counter, tucking one leg beneath her.

"I'm impressed already. Sebastian Alderidge, billionaire chef."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I warn, turning back to the stove. "And it's just Bash. Sebastian is for board meetings and people I don't like."

I can feel her watching me as I move around the kitchen, heating the pan, adding butter, pouring in the eggs. It should feel intrusive, this silent observation, but instead it feels... intimate. Like we've done this before. Like we could do it again.

"You take your coffee black, right?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

She looks surprised. "How did you know?"

I shrug, turning back to the eggs. "I pay attention."

What I don't say: *I've been watching you for weeks. I know how you take your coffee, what pens you prefer, which corner of your lip you bite when you're concentrating.*

The toast pops up, slightly darker than intended. I

butter it quickly, slide the eggs onto plates, and pour two mugs of coffee. It's not a fancy breakfast, but it's honest. Real. Like this moment between us.

I set a plate and mug in front of her, then take the seat beside her rather than across. Proximity feels important suddenly, as if the physical distance between us might translate to emotional distance if I'm not careful.

"Thank you," she says, picking up her fork.

We eat in comfortable silence, the only sounds the clink of silverware against plates and the distant hum of the city waking up beyond my windows. Occasionally our elbows bump or our knees touch, small points of contact that send ripples of awareness through me.

She eats methodically, taking small bites, occasionally glancing at me from the corner of her eye. I wonder what she's thinking, what she sees when she looks at me like that. Am I still the playboy billionaire from the tabloids? The demanding boss? The man who made her come apart beneath his hands last night? Or something else entirely?

"You're good at that," she says eventually, nodding toward my now-empty plate.

"Eating?"

She rolls her eyes. "Cooking. The eggs were perfect."

"Don't sound so surprised," I tease, but pleasure warms my chest at the simple compliment. "I have hidden depths."

"Clearly." She takes a sip of her coffee, watching me over the rim of the mug. "So... what is this, Bash?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with possibility.

What is this? A one-night stand redux? The beginning of something more? A complication neither of us needs?

"Whatever we want it to be," I answer carefully, setting down my mug. "But I know what I want."

Her eyes widen slightly. "And what's that?"

“You.” The word comes out simpler, more direct than I intended. “Not just last night. Not just sex.”

I turn on my stool to face her fully.

“I want to see where this goes, Savannah. No games, no bullshit. Just us, figuring it out together.”

She sets down her coffee, her fingers trembling slightly.

“That’s... a lot.”

“Too much?”

“No, it’s...” She hesitates, searching for words. “It’s unexpected. You’re not exactly known for...”

“Commitment? Relationships? Basic human emotion?” I supply, grinning to take the sting out of it.

She smiles despite herself.

“I was going to say ‘slowing down,’ but those work too.”

I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers together on the counter.

“I remember every second of that night at the Regent,” I tell her, watching her eyes widen at the sudden change of subject. “You didn’t cling. You didn’t beg. You just vanished. I think that’s what wrecked me.”

She looks away, but her fingers tighten on mine.

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” she admits quietly. “Men like you... women are interchangeable.”

“Men like me,” I repeat, the phrase landing like a blow. “Is that still how you see me?”

She turns back to me, her gaze direct now, searching.

“I don’t know what to think anymore. The man from the bar, the boss, the guy who makes me breakfast... they all feel like different people.”

“They’re all me,” I tell her, bringing our joined hands to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Some parts I show the world, some I don’t. But they’re all real.”

She doesn’t respond, but something shifts in her expres-

sion, the wall behind her eyes thinning, allowing me a glimpse of what lies beyond. Confusion, yes. Desire, definitely. But something else too, something that looks dangerously like fear.

“What are you afraid of?” I ask, the question slipping out before I can stop it.

She withdraws her hand from mine, wrapping both around her coffee mug as if seeking warmth.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Liar,” I say, but gently this time.

She sighs, shoulders dropping slightly. “This is complicated, Bash. You’re my boss. We work together. There are... expectations.”

“Fuck expectations,” I say, with more heat than I intended. “I’ve spent my whole life navigating other people’s expectations. My father’s, my brothers’, the board’s. For once, I want to do something simply because it feels right.”

“And this feels right to you?” she asks, gesturing between us.

“Yes.” No hesitation. No doubt. “Doesn’t it to you?”

She doesn’t answer immediately, and for a moment I think I’ve pushed too far, too fast.

Then she says, so quietly I almost miss it, “Yes.”

The single word sends a rush of something warm and unfamiliar through my chest. Not triumph exactly, though there’s an element of that. More like... relief. Like I’ve been holding my breath without realizing it, and now I can finally exhale.

“So we’re doing this,” I say, not quite a question.

“We’re doing this,” she agrees, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Whatever *this* is.”

I grin, sliding off the stool to stand between her knees.

“I think ‘*this*’ starts with me kissing you good morning properly.”

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs brushing her cheekbones as I lean in. The kiss is gentle, almost chaste compared to last night’s passion. This feels like sealing a pact, morning breath be damned, making a promise with more than just words.

When I pull back, her eyes stay closed for a beat longer than necessary, as if she’s savoring the moment. Then they flutter open, meeting mine with a softness I haven’t seen before.

“I should really go home and change,” she murmurs, but makes no move to get up.

“Five more minutes,” I bargain, pressing another quick kiss to her lips before stepping back. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

She raises an eyebrow, wariness creeping back into her expression.

“That sounds ominous.”

I lean against the counter, crossing my arms.

“It’s about work, actually. The Imperial Club launch is coming up, and I need someone I trust on the committee. Someone with an eye for detail and the ability to handle pressure.”

Understanding dawns in her eyes.

“You want me on the launch committee?”

“I want you to lead it,” I correct. “Under my supervision, of course, but you’d have significant autonomy. It’s a promotion, with a corresponding raise.”

She blinks, clearly caught off guard.

“Bash, that’s... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” I suggest, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I want you in this with me, Savannah. Not

just personally, but professionally too. I've seen what you can do, your eye for design, your organizational skills, the way you handle people. I need that for this launch."

She hesitates, and for a moment I think she might refuse. Then she nods, just once, a quick dip of her chin.

"Okay. Yes."

"Yes to which part?" I ask, needing the clarity.

A small smile touches her lips.

"To both. The job and... this. Us."

I don't try to hide my satisfaction. "Good. That's... good."

She glances at the clock on the microwave and sighs.

"I really do have to go now. I need to change, and we both have meetings this morning."

"Right," I agree, reluctant but accepting. "Reality calls."

I follow her back to the bedroom, watching as she gathers her discarded clothes from last night. She disappears into the bathroom to change, emerging a few minutes later in her emerald dress, looking somehow both ruffled and elegant.

"I'll call a car for you," I offer, already reaching for my phone.

"No need," she says, slipping on her heels. "I can grab a cab downstairs."

"Savannah," I start, then pause, unsure how to say what I'm feeling. "Thank you. For staying. For breakfast."

Her expression softens.

"Thank you for asking me to."

I walk her to the door, unable to resist pulling her in for one last kiss before she leaves.

"I'll see you at the office," I murmur against her lips.

"I'll be the one in yesterday's clothes," she jokes, but there's a lightness to her I haven't seen before.

“You’d still be the most beautiful woman in the building.”

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the pleased flush on her cheeks as she turns away.

“Goodbye, Bash.”

“Until later,” I correct, leaning against the doorframe as she steps into the elevator.

She glances back once before the elevator doors close, and the look in her eyes—part wonder, part fear, part something I’m not ready to name—stays with me long after she’s gone.

I stand in the empty foyer, watching the floor numbers descend on the display panel, a smile spreading across my face that I couldn’t suppress if I tried.

She said yes. To the job, to us, to whatever comes next. It feels like winning, but better. Like finding something I didn’t know I was looking for.

I turn away from the elevator, heading back toward the bedroom to shower and dress for the day ahead. The sight of my rumpled sheets stops me in my tracks—tangible evidence of the night we shared, of the morning after that wasn’t just about sex.

Something’s different now. I’m different. The thought should terrify me, this seismic shift in my carefully constructed world. Instead, it feels like clarity. Like purpose.

For the first time in my life, I’m all in. No hedged bets, no easy outs, no escape plans. And somehow, that doesn’t feel like a risk at all; it feels like the surest thing I’ve ever known.

Chapter Sixteen

Savannah

I step into the Alderidge-Hathaway lobby fifteen minutes early, coffee in hand, portfolio tucked under my arm. Professional. Composed. Definitely not thinking about how Bash's hands felt on my skin last night.

The elevator doors slide open, and there he is—Sebastian Alderidge himself, looking infuriatingly put-together in a charcoal suit that probably costs more than my rent. His eyes find mine immediately, that familiar heat flaring before he masks it with professional distance.

“Ms. Bishop,” he says, voice neutral as two executives join us in the elevator. “I trust you have the vendor reports ready for this morning's meeting?”

“Of course, Mr. Alderidge.” Two can play at this game. I hand him the folder, our fingers brushing for a fraction too long. “I've highlighted the discrepancies in the lighting budget.”

The executives exit on the fourteenth floor, leaving us alone. The moment the doors close, Bash's professional mask slips—just enough for his eyes to soften.

“You look beautiful today,” he murmurs, gaze traveling

from my carefully styled hair to my sensible heels. “Though I prefer how you looked this morning. In my bed.”

Heat floods my cheeks, but I don’t look away. This is our new normal—professional in public, something else entirely in private. Something I’m still learning to navigate.

“Focus, Mr. Alderidge,” I say, but I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips. “We have the launch committee in twenty minutes.”

He grins, all boyish charm beneath billion-dollar confidence.

“I’m extremely focused, Ms. Bishop. Just not on the meeting.”

The elevator doors open to our floor, and just like that, the moment passes. We step out together, a respectable distance between us as Lucas approaches with urgent questions about permit approvals.

But as Bash turns to his office, he catches my eye one last time—a private look that makes promises for later. And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I’m not running from those promises.

I’m running toward them.

THE SUBWAY DOORS OPEN WITH A HISS, RELEASING A wave of stale air scented with perfume, sweat, and the lingering metallic tang that seems embedded in every New York City train.

Joining the river of bodies flowing toward the exits, I merge into the crowd as my phone buzzes in my hand—an email from the event coordinator about floral arrangements for the Imperial Club launch—but I don’t open it yet. First: coffee.

Midtown hums with the particular energy of a Monday afternoon, that sweet spot between lunch rush and evening commute. The kind of buzz that used to energize me during my dancer days, when the city felt like one giant heartbeat and I was just trying to find my rhythm within it.

Now I navigate these streets with a different purpose. My heels click against the pavement with authority as I weave between tourists and locals. The weight of my leather portfolio tucked under my arm reminds me of who I am now: Savannah Bishop, launch committee lead for the most anticipated venue opening in Manhattan this year. Not a dancer, not a waitress, not a desperate daughter.

Professional. Capable. Chosen.

I slip into a corner café, joining the short line and scanning my notes while I wait. The barista calls my name, sliding an iced Americano across the counter. I take a long sip, letting the cold bitterness jolt my system, and step back into the sunlight.

Three blocks east, I need to check on the lighting installation. Four blocks south, there's a meeting with the catering team. Between those points, I have approximately forty-five minutes to review the guest list revisions and confirm the security protocols.

I'm halfway through my mental checklist when something catches my attention, a flash of movement, a familiar energy. I look up to find a line stretching down the block, bodies in various states of dance-ready attire: leotards under sweatpants, hair pulled back in tight buns or messy topknots, the collective nervous energy that radiates from dancers waiting for their chance.

My steps slow without my permission.

A flyer taped to the theater door flutters in the breeze reads:

OPEN CALL – Contemporary Jazz – Broadway Revival Auditions.

My chest tightens, a phantom ache spreading beneath my ribs. For a moment, I'm twenty-three again, standing in line with hope burning so bright in my veins I could barely stand still. The memory of it hits with physical force: the smell of rosin and sweat, the squeak of dance shoes against Marley floors, the way my heart used to hammer against my sternum before every combination.

A girl near the front of the line executes a quick stretch, her arabesque perfect even on the sidewalk. She can't be more than twenty, face bright with the kind of ambition that hasn't yet met disappointment. I know that look. I used to wear it like armor.

"You auditioning?" A voice breaks through my thoughts, a woman about my age, clipboard in hand, probably a production assistant.

"No," I say, the word coming out more firmly than I expected. "Just passing by."

She nods, already moving on to the next potential candidate, and I realize I'm still standing there, coffee growing watery in my hand, staring at a life I once wanted so badly I could taste it.

But my feet don't move toward the line. My hand doesn't reach for the flyer. Instead, I take another sip of my diluted coffee and continue walking.

The girl who would have stopped—who would have called in sick to work, borrowed clothes from someone in line, begged for a spot even without preparation—that girl is gone. She disappeared somewhere between my ex-boyfriend's betrayal and my mother's almost-foreclosure, between Wolfe's threats and Bash's kisses.

I don't mourn her passing as I navigate the crowded

sidewalk. There's something like peace in the acknowledgment, a quiet certainty replacing the longing I expected to feel.

At the crosswalk, I wait for the light to change, idly scrolling through emails. My phone buzzes with a new message, the notification sliding down from the top of my screen.

UNKNOWN.

I Own You. Still.

My blood doesn't freeze. My heart doesn't stop. I stare at the words, black and bold against the white background, and all I feel is a dull irritation, like discovering a pebble in my shoe after a long walk.

The crosswalk signal changes. Bodies move forward around me. I don't.

My thumb hovers over the notification. Just yesterday, those words would have sent me spiraling, trapped between terror and obligation. Today, they land differently.

I think about Bash's hands on my skin last night, gentle where I expected demanding. I think about his eyes this morning, bright with something that looked dangerously like hope as he asked me to stay. I think about the way he trusted me with the launch, not because I'm sleeping with him, but because he sees something in me I'm only beginning to recognize in myself.

The next crosswalk signal changes. This time, I move with the crowd, my finger sliding across the screen, not to open the email, but to delete it. Unread.

For a moment, I expect the sky to fall, for Wolfe to materialize from the crowd, his cold eyes narrowed in displeasure. For my phone to explode with threats against

my mother, against Bash, against the fragile new life I'm building.

Nothing happens.

I take a breath. Another. The world continues around me, indifferent to my small rebellion. I slip my phone back into my bag and keep walking, something unfamiliar and warm unfurling in my chest.

It feels like power.

HOURS LATER, I UNLOCK THE DOOR TO MY BROOKLYN apartment, kicking off my heels with a groan of relief. The day has stretched long, filled with vendor meetings and site inspections, but my mind feels surprisingly clear. The weight I've carried for weeks, the constant fear of Wolfe's next demand, the guilt over betraying Bash, feels lighter somehow.

Not gone. But manageable.

I change into leggings and an old cardigan, the soft fabric a welcome relief after a day in structured business attire. The apartment is quiet, with just the distant hum of traffic and the occasional creak of pipes in the background. I light a candle, its vanilla scent filling the small space, and settle at my tiny kitchen table with my planner and laptop.

"Alright," I murmur to myself, opening to a fresh page. "Let's do this right."

I'm not working on notes for Wolfe tonight. Not preparing another information drop about Bash's vulnerabilities or the Imperial Club's security protocols. Tonight, I'm planning my launch. My project. My future.

I start with color-coding: blue for vendor confirmations, green for PR and media touch points, and red for potential

issues that need contingency plans. My handwriting flows across the page, neat and precise, each item carefully considered. Not just because it's my job, but because I want this to succeed. Because I'm building something that matters.

"The stage lighting installation is running behind," I say aloud, making a note to schedule a site visit first thing tomorrow. "And the custom glassware order needs confirmation."

I pull up the vendor's website, checking their production timeline against our needs. They're cutting it close, but if I push the delivery date up by three days, we should have enough buffer for quality control.

I send the email, my tone firm but polite, making it clear that this timeline isn't negotiable. Professional. Authoritative. The voice of someone who knows her worth.

My phone buzzes with a response almost immediately.

Ms. Bishop, we'll make it happen. Materials being ordered tonight, production starts tomorrow. Will keep you updated daily.

I smile, a small thrill of satisfaction running through me. This is what competence feels like, not the desperate dance of trying to please everyone, but the steady rhythm of knowing that I'm good at what I do.

For hours, I work through each element of the launch, building spreadsheets and timelines and drafting emails that will go out first thing tomorrow. I create a communication protocol for the team, ensuring everyone knows exactly who handles what, when, and how. I outline talking points for Bash's speech, making note of key stakeholders who should be mentioned.

It's nearly midnight when I finally sit back, rubbing my eyes. My candle has burned low, casting a warm glow over pages of notes and plans. There's a strange peace in the exhaustion that settles over me. It's not the hollow fatigue of living under threats but the earned weariness of creating something real.

I close my planner, running my fingers over the leather cover. Tomorrow, there will be more emails to answer, more fires to put out, and more details to manage. Tomorrow, Wolfe might try again, finding new ways to remind me of what he thinks I owe him.

But tonight, I chose myself. I chose Bash. I chose the future over the past, even if that future is still uncertain.

My phone lights up with a text from Bash.

Missing you. Dinner tomorrow? I promise not to talk about work. Well, maybe a little about work.

I smile, typing back

Deal. But you're cooking this time.

His response is immediate.

Challenge accepted. Hope you like eggs, because that's pretty much my entire culinary repertoire.

I laugh, the sound filling my quiet apartment. It's strange how quickly this has become normal, this easy banter, this gentle flirtation. Strange how right it feels, even with everything else hanging in the balance.

I like eggs. But I like you more.

It's the most honest thing I've said to him, and my finger hovers over the send button for a long moment before pressing it.

Three dots appear, disappear, appear again. Finally.

That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. Sleep well, Savannah. Dream of me.

I set my phone down, that unfamiliar warmth spreading through me again. There's no future where this ends well, not with Wolfe's shadow still looming and the lies still between us. But for tonight, I allow myself to imagine it. A world where I get to keep this feeling. Where I get to keep him.

I move to the window, looking out at the Brooklyn skyline. Somewhere across the bridge, Bash is in his penthouse, maybe thinking of me too. The thought used to terrify me—being seen, being known. Now it feels like the only thing keeping me anchored.

Tomorrow, I'll face whatever comes. I'll manage the launch, navigate the growing connection with Bash, and deal with Wolfe if he resurfaces. I'll do it not because I'm trapped or scared, but because I'm choosing this path. My path.

The girl who used to dance would've turned back today, back to the familiar dream, back to the safety of what she thought she wanted. The woman building this launch? She just walked on.

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I don't feel like I'm falling.

I feel like I'm flying.

Chapter Seventeen

Bash

“What do you mean the IDs don’t match?” I grip my coffee mug tighter, the ceramic hot against my palm.

Dinner with Savannah: canceled. The reservation at Sixty-One: gone. Another casualty of this clusterfuck of a morning that started with a 4:00 a.m. security alert and spiraled from there.

I’d texted her before dawn.

Rain check on tonight. Emergency at the Club.

Her response had been swift, professional.

No problem. Need me there?

Always the perfect assistant, even when I’d rather have her as something else entirely.

Rodriguez shifts his weight, tablet clutched to his chest like a shield.

“IRIS flagged it this morning. Three contractor badges

accessed the north wing, but the digital signatures don't align with their scheduled shifts."

The boardroom falls silent. Eight faces turn toward me, waiting for a reaction. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, Manhattan glitters in morning sunlight, oblivious to the bomb that just dropped in my lap. Savannah sits at the far end of the table, her notepad ready, expression giving nothing away despite our canceled plans.

"How long?" I set my mug down with deliberate care.

"The system detected it at 4:17 a.m." Rodriguez swipes through his tablet. "Security protocols isolated the breach, but—"

"But what?" My voice cuts sharper than intended.

"It triggered an automatic twenty-four-hour hold on all new contractor clearances." Rodriguez's expression remains carefully neutral. "Which means the flooring team can't start today."

The marble slab inside my chest—the one labeled "*control*"—cracks a little more. We're already three weeks behind schedule. The permits barely cleared after the scandal. Every day costs thousands. And now this.

"Have we identified which contractors?" I scan the room, noting how everyone subtly leans away from me. Everyone except Savannah, who sits at the far end of the table, her gaze steady on my face.

"Not yet. IRIS is running verification protocols." Rodriguez glances at his watch. "We should have names within the hour."

"An hour." I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "That's an hour we don't have. The launch is in four weeks. Four weeks."

I turn to Jenkins, our junior operations manager, who's been methodically shredding his napkin into tiny pieces.

“What about relocating the eastern corridor team? Can they shift to the north wing?”

Jenkins freezes mid-shred.

“I—I don’t think that’s feasible. They’re specialized in—
“

“I didn’t ask if it was their specialty. I asked if it could be done.” My tone sharpens, the pressure in my chest building. “We need solutions, not excuses.”

Jenkins’ face flushes red.

“Sir, with all due respect, moving teams without proper planning creates more problems than—”

“Then find me a solution that works! That’s literally your job.” The words escape before I can catch them, landing like a slap. The room collectively holds its breath.

Jenkins looks like I’ve struck him. He nods once, gathers his papers, and rises.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Guilt hits me immediately, but pride keeps my jaw locked. I watch him leave, the door clicking shut with quiet finality. No one else moves. No one speaks.

“Rodriguez,” I finally manage, forcing my voice to level. “Get me those names. Everyone else, we need a revised timeline on my desk by noon. That’s all.”

The room empties swiftly, relief evident in the speed of their retreat. All except Savannah, who remains seated, making notes in her leather-bound planner. I wait for judgment in her eyes, disappointment, fear, something.

Instead, she simply looks up.

“I’ll speak with Jenkins.”

“I handled it poorly.” The admission costs me, but it feels necessary with her.

“You did.” She closes her planner, no sugar-coating. “But the concern is valid. May I make a suggestion?”

I gesture for her to continue, curious despite myself.

“We implement a rolling vendor schedule. Teams rotate through secured zones based on a staggered timeline. It will look like we planned it, a security feature, not a reaction.” She stands, straightening papers with efficient movements. “I’ll draft it now and have Rodriguez review it before distribution.”

The solution is elegant in its simplicity. It buys us time without revealing weakness. “Do it.”

She nods once, professional and contained, but I catch the faintest smile at the corners of her mouth. Not smug, just... knowing. Like she sees through the cracks I’m desperately trying to seal.

“Savannah.” Her name feels different on my tongue these days, weighted with everything unsaid between us.

She pauses at the door. “Yes?”

“Thank you.” The words feel inadequate, but they’re all I have.

“It’s my job.” She holds my gaze for one heartbeat longer than necessary before slipping out, leaving me alone with my cooling coffee and the sensation that I’ve just been steadied by hands I never expected to trust.

BY NOON, IRIS HAS IDENTIFIED THE BADGES OF maintenance contractors who were incorrectly logged into the system. Not sabotage, just human error. The immediate crisis passes, but the ripple effects disrupt our entire day. I spend hours in back-to-back calls with vendors, adjusting timelines and budgets, swallowing my pride to smooth ruffled feathers.

Through it all, I catch glimpses of Savannah speaking quietly with Jenkins, coordinating with Rodriguez, and fielding calls I should be handling. The Imperial Club team falls into orbit around her, not because she demands it, but because she makes order from chaos without wielding fear as a weapon.

It unsettles me. Not because she's overstepping; she's doing exactly what I need her to do. Because watching her reminds me how brittle my own authority has become. How much I've needed someone beside me who doesn't just follow, but leads when I falter.

By seven, the offices empty. The day's fires are, if not extinguished, at least contained. From my window, I watch lights flicker on across Manhattan as dusk settles over the city. Three blocks away, the Imperial Club stands like a promise, or a threat, its scaffolding silhouette stark against the purple-orange sky.

I need to see it. Need to remind myself what I'm fighting for.

My fingers move before I can second-guess, typing a message to Savannah.

Site walk. Just us.

Her response comes quickly.

When?

Now

On my way.

I loosen my tie as I head toward the elevator, shrugging

off my suit jacket. The Imperial Club isn't just a business venture for me. It's proof, to my family, to New York's elite, and to myself, that I'm more than the tabloid headlines and Alderidge black sheep. Four weeks until the launch. Four weeks to prove I can finish what I started.

Four weeks until I have to face my brothers and mother with either triumph or failure.

The car drops me at the site entrance just as Savannah arrives. She's changed from her office attire into dark jeans and a simple white button-down, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, feet in practical flats. Ready to work, not to impress. This version of her strikes me as more intimate somehow.

"Everything stabilized?" She falls into step beside me as we badge through security.

"For now." I lead her through the service entrance, past the half-finished kitchens and storage areas. "Jenkins reworked the eastern team schedule. They'll split shifts to cover the north wing until the clearances reset."

"Good." She nods, professional but pleased. "Rodriguez mentioned the badge issue was a clerical error, not a breach."

"This time." The words come out darker than intended. "Next time might be different."

She studies me, not speaking. Waiting.

"There's always a next time with projects like this. My father used to say the difference between winners and losers was preparation for the blow you don't see coming." I punch the service elevator call button harder than necessary. "I didn't see today coming."

"No one did." Her voice is measured. "But we handled it."

"You handled it." The elevator arrives with a soft ding,

and we step inside. I punch the button for the second floor. “I just yelled at Jenkins.”

Her lips quirk. “That was... less helpful.”

Despite everything, I laugh. “Brutal honesty. I like it.”

“You seemed like you could use some.” The elevator stops, doors sliding open to reveal the darkened corridor. “Where are we going?”

I don’t answer immediately, leading her down the hallway past construction materials and equipment draped in protective coverings. The building is eerily silent at night, our footsteps echoing against exposed concrete and partial drywall.

We reach a set of massive double doors—temporary installations, not the final design—and I pause, hand on the handle.

“I come here sometimes. When it gets to be too much.” I push the door open. “This is what matters.”

The Imperial Club ballroom unfolds before us, a cavernous space bathed in amber light from temporary construction lamps. Scaffolding climbs the walls where intricate molding will eventually go. The floor is partially finished, gleaming marble in some sections, raw concrete in others. Chandeliers hang half-assembled from the soaring ceiling, crystal pieces wrapped and waiting.

Dust motes dance in the light beams, giving the room an otherworldly quality, part construction zone, part cathedral. It’s raw and unfinished and somehow perfect in its potential.

Savannah steps forward, her expression soft with wonder.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It will be.” I close the door behind us, sealing us into

our own universe of golden dust and shadows. “Right now, it’s a mess.”

“No.” She shakes her head, moving further into the space, her fingers trailing over a velvet swatch pinned to a design board. “It’s becoming. There’s a difference.”

I watch her explore, something unfamiliar expanding in my chest as she touches elements of my vision with reverence. She stops beneath the largest chandelier, looking up at the asymmetrical glory of crystal and metal.

“Is this where you’ll have the first dance?” she asks, turning in a slow circle.

“The ribbon-cutting will be here.” I cross to her, footsteps echoing in the vast space. “This is where it all ends—or begins. Depending on how you look at it.”

She faces me fully, and something in her expression makes my breath catch. Understanding. Not of the project, but of me.

“You’re good at this, you know.” Her voice is quiet but clear in the empty room. “Not just the business part. The vision. Seeing what could be.”

“So are you.” I step closer, drawn by some invisible force. “You see solutions when I only see problems. You see people when I see obstacles.”

“Sebastian.” My name in her mouth sounds like a revelation.

I kiss her. Not the teasing, playful kisses we’ve shared before. Not the slow, deliberate seduction of our night together. This is need, raw and unfiltered. Knowledge. Recognition.

Her hands clutch my shirt, pulling me closer as she responds with equal hunger. My fingers tangle in her ponytail, loosening it until her hair falls around her shoulders.

We stumble backward until she connects with a section of scaffolding, the metal pipes cool against our heated skin.

“Here?” she gasps as my mouth trails down her neck.

“Here.” I reclaim her lips, hands already working the buttons of her shirt. “Right here. Where everything that matters is happening.”

Her fingers find my belt, movements urgent. “The floor—”

“I don’t care.” I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I press her against the scaffolding. “I need you now.”

I pause, breathing hard against her neck.

“Fuck. I don’t have a condom.”

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, eyes locked on mine with unmistakable clarity despite the haze of desire.

“I’m on birth control. I’m clean. You?”

“Yes. Clean.” My voice is rough with need. “You sure?”

“Yes.” She pulls me closer, her decision made. “Now, Sebastian.”

We don’t fully undress; there’s too much urgency, too much desperate need. Her shirt hangs open, my pants around my ankles. It’s messy and imperfect and absolutely necessary. When I push into her, her gasp echoes in the empty ballroom, sacred as a prayer.

I grip her hips tighter, feeling her body yield to mine in the half-light of the unfinished ballroom. She’s warm and perfect against me, her back arched against the cool metal scaffolding.

“God, Savannah,” I breathe against her neck. “You feel incredible.”

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, nails marking me through my shirt. She’s not gentle. She doesn’t need to be.

This isn't about tenderness. It's about need, raw and undeniable between us.

I thrust deeper, and she throws her head back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. Her blouse hangs open, revealing the black lace of her bra, the rise and fall of her chest with each ragged breath. Even half-dressed, half-wild, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Sebastian," she moans, and hearing my name, my real name, in that breathless voice nearly undoes me.

The scaffolding creaks with our rhythm, metal pipes cold against my knuckles where I brace myself. Dust and promise hang in the air around us. In this moment, surrounded by the bones of what will be, we're creating something too, something I'm not ready to name.

I slide one hand up her body, palm grazing the delicate skin of her ribs, thumb brushing the underside of her breast. She shivers, eyes half-closed, lips parted. I want to memorize her like this: undone, unguarded, real.

"Look at me," I command softly.

Her eyes flutter open, hazel-green meeting mine with an intensity that steals my breath. No walls. No pretense. Just Savannah, seeing me as clearly as I see her.

"Don't close your eyes," I tell her, increasing my pace. "I want to watch you come apart."

Her breath catches. Her legs tighten around my waist, drawing me impossibly closer. I can feel her trembling, right on the edge.

"Let go," I whisper against her lips. "I've got you."

Something breaks in her expression, and she comes with a cry that echoes through the empty ballroom, bouncing off unfinished walls and half-installed fixtures. The sound of it, and the feel of her pulsing around me, pushes me over too. I bury my face in her neck as release tears through me,

holding her tight against the scaffolding as we both shudder through the aftershocks.

For a moment, we stay frozen, connected, breathing hard, neither of us willing to break the spell. The only sound is our mingled breath and the distant hum of the city beyond the walls.

Slowly, reluctantly, I ease her down, making sure her feet are steady on the concrete before I step back. Her hair is wild around her shoulders, her lips swollen from my kisses. She looks thoroughly claimed, and something primitive in me loves it.

“You okay?” I ask, tucking myself away, adjusting my clothes.

She nods, fingers working the buttons of her blouse with a slight tremble. Her eyes lock with mine, something unspoken passing between us.

“I don’t think I’ll ever look at scaffolding the same way again,” she says, a hint of a smile playing at her lips.

I laugh, the tension breaking just enough. “That makes two of us.”

This thing between us is transforming—evolving beyond physical release into something with gravity. Something that pulls us together no matter how many reasons we have to stay apart. And for once, I’m not fighting it.

I reach out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. The gesture feels more intimate somehow than what we just did against the scaffolding. Her eyes meet mine, and for a second, I glimpse something vulnerable there, something that makes my chest ache.

Then she blinks, and it’s gone, replaced by her usual composed expression. But now I know what lies beneath. I’ve seen her come undone in my arms, heard my name on her lips like salvation.

And I want more. Not just her body, though God knows I want that too, but all of it. The sharp mind behind those calculating eyes. The loyalty that drives her. The secrets she keeps so carefully guarded.

I want Savannah Bishop. And that terrifies me more than any business deal ever could.

“We should probably move,” she murmurs after a long silence. “Before security does its rounds.”

“Probably.” I don’t loosen my hold. “In a minute.”

“Thank you,” she says, her palm warm against my cheek.

“For the mind-blowing sex? You’re welcome.” The joke comes automatically, a shield against vulnerability.

She smiles, but shakes her head.

“For showing me this place. For letting me see what matters to you.”

The simple truth of it hits me harder than any declaration could. I’ve let her in, not just to my bed, but to the heart of what I’m building. The foundation of who I’m becoming.

“I want you here,” I tell her, surprised by my own honesty. “Not just tonight. When it opens. When it succeeds. I want you beside me.”

Something flickers in her eyes. Joy, but shadowed with something else I can’t quite name. She kisses me, soft and lingering, before pulling away.

“We should go. Before we get caught and end up in tomorrow’s tabloids.”

“Savannah.”

She looks back, half in shadow, half in golden light. “Yes?”

I want to say something profound. Something that captures the significance of what just happened, not just the sex, but this sharing of space, of vision, of future.

Empire of Desire

Instead, I hold out my hand. "Let me take you home."

She hesitates, just for a heartbeat, before slipping her hand into mine. Her fingers curl around mine, warm and sure, as if she's made a decision.

"Yes," she says simply, and the word feels like more than agreement. It feels like a promise.

I don't say she's mine. I show her, in the only way I know how.

Chapter Eighteen

Savannah

The Imperial Club doesn't breathe the same after everyone leaves.

It's quieter, more honest somehow. The daytime chaos of hammering, shouting, and the constant rush of bodies moving through unfinished corridors fades into this strange reverence. Only the occasional creak of settling beams and the distant hum of temporary generators break the silence.

I stand in the center of what will become the grand entrance, taking in the partially finished marble beneath my feet and the bare walls surrounding me. The construction crew cleared out an hour ago. Even Rodriguez finally packed up, tipping an invisible hat as he passed me on his way out.

"You're crazy, Bishop," he'd said, not unkindly. "But the good kind of crazy."

Now it's just me and the bones of Bash's dream, this half-formed masterpiece that's become mine too, somehow. I run my fingers along a seam in the wall where antique wood paneling will eventually go. The blueprints are etched in my memory now: English oak, salvaged from a

19th-century London gentlemen's club, each panel hand-restored.

Bash spent three months tracking down the right materials. Three months fighting for authenticity when most people would settle for a convincing replica.

It matters that it's real, he told me once. The history. The craftsmanship. You can feel the difference even if you can't name it.

I step carefully over a bundle of exposed wiring, making my way toward the east wing. The emergency lights cast long shadows across unfinished floors, turning mundane construction materials into something almost mystical. Something becoming.

My phone buzzes. Rodriguez again, with the updated vendor report I'd requested. I smile slightly, noting he's cc'd me but not Bash. It's a small thing, easily explained by practicality. I'm handling the details, after all, but it feels significant.

I'm not just assisting anymore. I'm leading.

I scan the document, catching a discrepancy in the lighting fixtures for the north corridor. We'd specified the antique brass finish, but the order shows polished nickel. Easy fix, but the kind of detail that would drive Bash crazy if it slipped through.

I tap out a quick reply.

North corridor fixtures showing wrong finish. Please confirm with vendor that we're proceeding with antique brass as specified in final plans.

Rodriguez responds almost immediately.

Noted. You're a beast. Will confirm first thing.

A strange warmth spreads through my chest. Pride, maybe. Or belonging. Six weeks ago, I was desperate and cornered, taking this job because I had no choice. Now I'm catching details even Rodriguez might miss, protecting the integrity of something that matters.

I pocket my phone and continue my solitary tour, drawn toward the ballroom. The massive double doors are temporary, plain industrial things that will eventually be replaced with hand-carved mahogany, but I push them open with a sense of ceremony anyway.

The ballroom takes my breath away every time.

Soaring ceilings disappear into shadow above temporary work lights. The parquet floor is only partially installed, gleaming islands of intricate woodwork surrounded by bare concrete. Scaffolding hugs the walls where ornate moldings will eventually go. Crystal chandeliers hang half-assembled, draped in protective coverings that make them look like strange cocoons waiting to emerge.

But even unfinished, the space feels sacred. Important. The kind of room where history happens. Where legacies are made.

I walk to the center, my footsteps echoing in the vastness. This is where we stood yesterday, where Bash pressed me against the scaffolding and made me forget everything but him.

The memory heats my skin, but it's more than just desire that lingers. It's the way he looked at me afterward, raw and unguarded. The way he said, "*I want you here,*" like he was offering more than just a place at his side for the launch.

Like he was offering a future.

My phone buzzes again, breaking the spell. Another

email. I pull it out, expecting more vendor updates or maybe a message from Bash.

The subject line freezes me in place.

I Own You. Still.

No sender name. But I don't need one. I know exactly who it's from.

My thumb hovers over the screen, suddenly reluctant to open it. For a moment, I consider deleting it unread. Pretending I never saw it. But that's not how this works, and I know it.

I tap the message open.

Last chance. Or your mother's loan terms go public.

Five days since I've responded to Wolfe. Five days of silence, my small rebellion. And now this.

My hands tremble slightly, but the rest of me goes still. The fight-or-flight response I've lived with for weeks rises like a tide, familiar and suffocating.

I know what he wants. The final designs for the security system. Access points. Anything he could use to disrupt the launch. But I also know what happens if I give it to him: Bash fails. The Imperial Club crashes before it opens. And everything I've watched him pour his heart and soul into crumbles.

I take a deep breath. Then another.

My finger moves, but not to reply. Instead, I create a new folder in my email, "*Leverage*," and save Wolfe's message there.

No tears. No fear. Just a strange, clear calm washing over me.

This is war now.

I shut the screen, sliding the phone back into my pocket. The ballroom seems different suddenly, more fragile, more precious. I walk the perimeter slowly, trailing my fingers along the wall where velvet panels will eventually hang. Crimson, the exact shade of a perfect rose. I remember Bash arguing with the supplier, insisting on custom-dyed fabric when the standard red was “almost right.”

Almost isn't right, he'd said. It's a compromise. And this room doesn't compromise.

I stop at the far window, still covered in construction film, the view of Manhattan obscured but hinted at. In four weeks, this space will be transformed, filled with light and music and the city's elite. Bash will stand where I'm standing now, triumphant and brilliant, finally proven right.

Unless Wolfe gets his way.

“I won't be the reason he fails,” I whisper to the empty room, the words a promise and a prayer.

The truth hits me with unexpected force: I'm not just protecting my mother anymore. I'm not even just protecting myself. I'm protecting him—protecting us. Whatever this fragile, beautiful thing between us is becoming.

I love him.

The realization should terrify me. Instead, it steadies me, a foundation beneath my feet more solid than marble.

My phone buzzes again. This time it's Tessa.

Dinner? I've got tea to spill about the Morrison story.

I type back quickly:

Rain check? Still at the site.

Working late again? Alderidge must be a slave driver, she replies.

It's not him. It's me. I want to be here.

I can almost see her raised eyebrow through the phone.

Okay, workaholic. Tomorrow then. And don't think I'm not getting ALL the details on why you're suddenly married to this job.

I smile, sliding the phone away without answering. How do I explain that this isn't just a job anymore? That somewhere between betraying Bash and falling for him, the Imperial Club became mine too?

The building settles around me, creaking softly. I check my watch—nearly 9 p.m. I should go. There's nothing more I can do tonight, and tomorrow will bring fresh challenges.

But I linger, drawn back to the center of the ballroom. I close my eyes, imagining it complete: chandeliers casting golden light, music filling the air, the room alive with possibility. I can almost see Bash in a tuxedo, standing at the entrance, pride and relief mingling on his face as his vision becomes reality.

I want that for him. More than I've wanted anything in a long time.

The realization brings clarity. Wolfe might own my secrets, but he doesn't own my future. He doesn't own what I feel for Bash, or what we're building together.

The ballroom gleams around me, half-finished but full of potential. Like me. Like us.

I straighten my shoulders, decision made. No more playing both sides. No more feeding Wolfe just enough to keep him satisfied. From now on, I protect what matters,

Lily Rae

even if it means facing consequences I've spent months avoiding.

My phone buzzes one last time.

BASH.

You still there?

Yes. Walking the ballroom.

Without me? I'm jealous.

I smile, warmth spreading through me.

The ballroom misses you too.

Only the ballroom?

Maybe not only the ballroom.

There's a pause before his next message appears:

I'm stuck in this dinner with investors.
Save me.

You'll survive. They're writing the checks
that make all this possible, remember?

I'd rather be there with you. Doing what we
did yesterday.

Heat creeps up my neck.

Behave, Mr. Alderidge.

Never. That's why you like me.

Empire of Desire

I laugh softly, the sound echoing in the empty space.

That's why I like you.

I'll see you tomorrow, Bishop. Don't work too late.

Goodnight, Bash.

I slip the phone into my pocket, his presence lingering even in his absence. For the first time since this began, I feel something dangerously close to hope. Not just for the Imperial Club, but for us. For the possibility that when this is over, when the truth finally comes out, there might be something left to salvage.

I make my way toward the exit, pausing at the doorway for one last look at the ballroom. Shadows stretch across the floor like ghosts of what will be. Four weeks until the launch. Four weeks to figure out how to stop Wolfe without destroying everything else.

I can feel the weight of his threat pressing against my shoulders, but my spine doesn't bend beneath it. Not anymore. He thinks he's playing chess, but he doesn't realize the board has changed. I'm not just a pawn now.

I'm playing for keeps.

Chapter Nineteen

Bash

Morning light cuts sharp angles across the hallway as I step out of the elevator, two coffee cups balanced in one hand, my security badge in the other. The office floor is quiet at this hour—just the low hum of air conditioning and the distant ring of a phone somewhere in the accounting department. Most of the staff won't arrive for another hour, that delicate window before Manhattan fully wakes where productivity feels almost sacred.

I glance at my watch. 6:47 a.m.

I knew she'd be here early.

The badge reader flashes green as I scan into the executive wing. My footsteps echo against marble flooring, the sound bouncing off glass walls and closed doors.

There's something about this building in the early hours, all sharp edges and potential, that reminds me why I fought so hard to prove myself. The Alderidge name might have opened the door, but I'm the one who walked through it.

I pause outside the conference room, catching sight of her through the glass.

Savannah.

She's bent over the massive table, hair pulled into a loose knot at the nape of her neck, tendrils escaping around her face. Blueprints spread before her like conquered territory. Three different laptops open at strategic positions. She's muttering to herself as she compares marble samples, holding two up to catch the light while scowling at a third.

She hasn't seen me yet. There's something raw and honest in her movements when she thinks no one's looking, in the way her fingers trace the edge of a blueprint with reverence, how she nibbles her lower lip when concentrating. It hits me suddenly that I could stand here all day, just watching her build my dreams with those careful hands.

When did this happen? This shift from wanting her to... needing her?

I clear my throat as I push the door open, and her head snaps up. For a fraction of a second, something unguarded flashes in those eyes, pleasure, surprise, maybe both, before her professional mask slides back into place.

"Morning," I say, keeping my tone casual despite the ridiculous flutter in my chest at just seeing her. "Figured you'd be terrorizing vendors already."

She straightens, running a hand over the already smooth surface of her skirt.

"Someone has to make sure the Calacatta marble actually arrives before the opening, and your supplier is suddenly claiming eight-week lead times."

I set her coffee on the table, sliding it toward her with a smile.

"Hence the death glare at innocent rock samples?"

"Innocent?" She raises an eyebrow, but her fingers curl around the cup. "The Nero Marquina is forty percent over

budget, and the Statuario is telling me sweet lies about its durability in high-traffic areas.”

I laugh, moving around the table to stand beside her. Close enough to catch the lavender scent of her shampoo, but not touching. Not yet.

“You’ve developed very strong feelings about stone.”

“If we’re spending six figures on flooring, it better not crack the first time someone drops a champagne flute.” She takes a sip of coffee, and something softens in her expression.

“You didn’t have to bring me coffee.”

“I know.”

Her eyes meet mine, and that current runs between us, the one that’s been building since that first night at the Regent. But there’s something new in it now, something that makes my chest tight. It’s not just desire anymore. It’s... fuck, I don’t even have words for it.

“You don’t have to babysit me,” she says, but there’s no bite to it. Just a question underneath.

“You’re not the one I’m protecting the project from,” I say, letting my fingers brush against her knuckles as I reach for one of the samples.

“You’re the one holding it up.”

The double meaning hangs there, unacknowledged but felt. Her hand trembles slightly, and I want nothing more than to take it in mine, to pull her against me and feel her warm and solid in my arms. Instead, I study the marble swatch, giving her space to breathe.

“The veining in this one works better with the lighting scheme,” I say, running my thumb over the cool surface of the stone.

She nods, professional again but standing close enough

that her arm occasionally brushes mine as she shuffles papers.

“That’s what I thought. The gold undertones will pick up the warmth from the chandeliers.”

We fall into a rhythm, discussing finishes and timelines, the conversation flowing easy and focused. This is what makes us good together, the way we can shift between intensity and efficiency, never losing the thread of either.

The door opens, and Rodriguez strides in with a stack of folders, barely glancing up from his tablet.

“Morning,” he says, nodding to us both. “Got the updated wiring specs from electrical. They want to know if we’re still using the antique fixtures in the east wing or switching to the reproductions.”

“Antique,” Savannah and I say in unison.

Rodriguez’s eyes flick between us, one eyebrow raising slightly.

“Right. Also, the fire marshal needs final approval on the sprinkler placement in the ballroom. Said it needs to be signed off by end of day.”

“I’ll handle it,” Savannah says, already reaching for the top folder. “Tell him I’ll have it on his desk by three.”

“And the permit office called,” Rodriguez continues, handing me a sticky note with a name and number. “Kane wants to discuss the final inspection schedule.”

I pocket the note, suddenly very aware of how close Savannah and I are standing, our shoulders nearly touching, her scent mingling with my cologne in a way that makes my pulse quicken.

“Thanks. Anything else?”

“Just the usual fires. Nothing Bishop can’t handle.” He shoots Savannah a rare smile. “The vendors are more afraid of her than they are of you now.”

“As they should be,” I say, and without thinking, without calculating, I lean over and press my lips to Savannah’s.

It’s brief. Soft. Nothing inappropriate for a professional setting. Just a casual brush of my mouth against hers, as natural as breathing. As if I’ve been doing it every morning for years.

Rodriguez freezes, tablet half-raised. Savannah’s breath catches, but she doesn’t pull away. If anything, she leans in slightly, just enough for me to feel it, to know she’s not rejecting this moment of public acknowledgment.

When I straighten, Rodriguez is watching us with undisguised interest.

I give him a one-shouldered shrug, zero apology in it. I’m not asking permission. I’m not explaining myself. This is happening, and the rest of the world can adjust accordingly.

After a beat, Rodriguez nods.

“I’ll tell Kane you’ll call him back.”

“Thanks,” I say, already turning back to the blueprints as if nothing momentous just occurred.

As Rodriguez exits, closing the door behind him with a soft click, I feel Savannah’s eyes on me.

“Was that necessary?” she asks, but there’s a warmth in her voice that belies the words.

I look up, meeting her gaze. “Yes.”

“That’s your entire explanation? ‘Yes?’”

“Would you prefer a PowerPoint presentation on why I felt like kissing you?”

Her lips twitch. “With pie charts and projected outcomes?”

“I could have my team prepare one.” I pick up another

marble sample, holding it against the light. "I like this one. You?"

"You mean for the ballroom? Or your bedroom?"

The question sends heat coursing through me, images of Savannah sprawled across my sheets flashing through my mind.

"Both," I say, voice lower than intended. "Definitely both."

She takes the sample from my hand, her fingers lingering against mine.

"It would work in either space. Good visual continuity."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"What would you call it?"

I step closer, eliminating the distance between us.

"I'd call it the most natural fucking thing in the world."

Her eyes darken, pupils dilating.

"Rodriguez is going to tell everyone."

"Good."

"Bash." There's a warning in her voice, but also a question.

I take her hand, threading my fingers through hers.

"I'm not hiding this, Bishop. Not from Rodriguez, not from my family, not from anyone."

"This is the Imperial Club we're talking about. Your legacy project. Your proof to the world that you're more than just—"

"A reckless playboy?" I finish for her. "The wild Alderidge brother? The family disappointment?"

She winces. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." I squeeze her hand gently. "But here's something you should know: I stopped caring about those labels the moment you walked into my boardroom."

“That’s not true.”

“It is.” I bring her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss against her knuckles. “I brought you here to help me build something impressive. Something that would shut up all the critics and prove I belong in the executive suite. But somewhere along the way, I realized I don’t give a damn what anyone thinks, except you.”

She stares at me, something vulnerable flickering in her eyes.

“You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” She pulls her hand away, turning back to the blueprints with forced focus. “Because we have work to do. Because the Imperial Club launches in four weeks. Because there are a thousand details that need our attention.”

I watch her for a moment, the deliberate way she avoids my gaze, the slight tremor in her hands as she rearranges papers that don’t need rearranging. There’s something happening here that I can’t quite read, a fear or hesitation I don’t understand.

“Savannah.” I wait until she looks up. “The work will get done. It always does.”

I let her retreat, understanding instinctively that pushing harder right now would be a mistake. Whatever wall she’s built around herself, I won’t tear it down by force. I’ll wait until she’s ready to lower the drawbridge herself.

“Alright,” I say, turning back to the table. “Let’s talk flooring.”

Relief flashes across her face as she launches into a detailed comparison of the marble options, complete with durability statistics and maintenance considerations. I listen, asking the right questions, making the necessary deci-

Empire of Desire

sions, but part of me is still caught in that moment, in the feel of her skin beneath my palm and the way she leaned into my touch despite her fear.

She's hiding something. I'm certain of it now. But I'm equally certain that whatever it is, we can face it together.

Chapter Twenty

Bash

The morning moves forward in a blur of vendor calls, material selections, and scheduling adjustments. Other team members filter in and out of the conference room, bringing questions and updates. Through it all, Savannah is brilliant. She's organized, decisive, three steps ahead of every problem. Each time she anticipates a complication before it arises, and with every sharp-witted solution she offers, I fall a little harder.

I've never seen someone move through the world the way she does, like she's constantly proving herself to an invisible judge. Like everything depends on getting it exactly right.

By noon, we've finalized the flooring selections, approved the lighting plan, and resolved the fire marshal's concerns. The room gradually empties as people head to lunch, until it's just the two of us again, surrounded by the organized chaos of creation.

"You should eat something," I say, noticing the untouched protein bar on the table beside her laptop.

She glances up from her screen, blinking as if surfacing from deep water.

“What?”

“Food. The thing humans need to survive.”

“I’m fine.”

“You haven’t eaten since that coffee I brought you.”

“I had the coffee. Coffee counts.”

I shake my head, pulling out my phone.

“I’m ordering in. Preferences?”

“You don’t need to—“

“Savannah.” I fix her with a look that stops her mid-protest. “Just tell me what you want to eat.”

Something shifts in her expression, a softness breaking through the professional veneer.

“Thai. The spicier the better.”

“That I can do.” I tap out an order on my phone, adding extra spring rolls because I’ve noticed she always steals them from my plate.

As I set my phone down, I catch her watching me, a complicated emotion in her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, then sighs. “It’s just... you notice things. Details. Everyone thinks you’re this impulsive risk-taker who doesn’t pay attention, but that’s not true at all, is it?”

The observation catches me off guard. “I notice what matters.”

“And right now, that’s the Imperial Club.”

“And you,” I add, holding her gaze. “Always you.”

She looks away, fingers tracing the edge of a blueprint.

“You shouldn’t put me in the same category as your legacy project.”

“Why not?”

“Because projects end, Bash. They launch, they succeed or fail, and then you move on to the next one.”

I move closer, leaning against the table beside her.

“Is that what you think this is? A project with an expiration date?”

“Isn’t it?” Her voice is deliberately light, but there’s an undertone of genuine question.

“No.” The word comes out firmer than I intended. “No, it’s not.”

She looks up at me, searching my face for something. Whatever she sees makes her breath catch.

“Bash—”

My phone rings, cutting her off. Kane’s name flashes on the screen.

“I should take this,” I say reluctantly. “It’s about the permits.”

She nods, once more the consummate professional. “Of course.”

I answer the call, stepping away from the table.

“Kane. About time you called me back.”

As I discuss inspection schedules and final approvals with the city official, I watch Savannah return to her work, head bent over the blueprints, completely focused once more. But there’s a new tension in her shoulders, a carefulness to her movements that wasn’t there before.

I made myself clear this morning. Kissed her in front of Rodriguez without hesitation. Told her she matters more than the Imperial Club. And instead of drawing her closer, I’ve somehow pushed her further away.

The thought sends a chill through me, despite the warmth of the room. Something is wrong. Something beyond the normal complications of a workplace relationship or the pressure of the launch.

I end the call with Kane, pocketing my phone as I turn back to Savannah. She’s staring at her laptop screen, but her

eyes aren't moving. She's not reading; she's thinking. And whatever those thoughts are, they're making her grip the edge of the table like it's the only solid thing in the room.

"Savannah."

She blinks, looking up with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"How's Kane? Still being difficult?"

"Nothing we can't handle." I move closer, studying her face. "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're a million miles away right now." I reach for her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "Talk to me."

She hesitates, conflict clear in her eyes. For a moment, I think she's going to tell me whatever she's been hiding. But then her phone buzzes, and the moment shatters.

She glances at the screen, and the color drains from her face.

"What is it?" I ask, alarm spreading through me at her expression.

"Nothing." She silences the phone, sliding it into her pocket with hands that aren't quite steady. "Just a reminder about a deadline."

It's a lie. I can feel it in the sudden distance between us, see it in the way she won't quite meet my eyes. But before I can press further, Rodriguez returns, tablet in hand.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, glancing between us. "But there's an issue with the custom chandeliers. The shipment's been delayed in customs."

Savannah latches onto the distraction with visible relief.

"How long?"

"At least a week. Maybe more."

"A week?" Her professional focus snaps back into place.

“That puts us right against the launch date. We need those fixtures installed and tested at least three days prior.”

“I know. I’ve been on the phone with customs for the past hour, but they’re not budging.”

I watch her shift into problem-solving mode, all personal concerns seemingly forgotten as she pulls up shipping manifests on her laptop.

“Give me the tracking numbers,” she says, fingers flying across the keyboard. “And the name of the customs agent you spoke with.”

As they dive into the logistics crisis, I stand back, observing the seamless way they work together. Whatever just happened, whatever message made her go pale, she’s buried it beneath layers of competence and governance.

But I haven’t forgotten. And I won’t let it go.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of crisis management and decision-making. Savannah is everywhere at once: on calls with customs officials, reworking installation schedules, finding alternative solutions that won’t compromise the design vision. She’s magnificent in her efficiency, dazzling in her determination.

And deliberately distant from me.

By evening, the chandelier crisis is temporarily resolved, with Savannah somehow convincing customs to expedite the shipment through an obscure regulatory exception. The office gradually empties, team members drifting away with tired waves and promises to pick up where they left off tomorrow.

As the last designer packs up and leaves, Savannah begins gathering her things, sliding folders into her bag with methodical precision.

“Let me drive you home,” I say, moving closer.

She shakes her head without looking up.

"I need to finish some things here. You go ahead."

"I'll wait."

"Bash." She finally meets my eyes, and there's a weariness in her expression that goes beyond physical exhaustion.

"Please. I need some space to think."

The words hit harder than they should.

"About what happened this morning?"

"About everything." She sighs, running a hand over her face. "The launch is in four weeks. There are a hundred details that could still go wrong. I just need to focus."

"And I'm a distraction."

"Yes." Her honesty is both refreshing and painful. "A beautiful, complicated distraction that I can't afford right now."

I step closer, cupping her face in my hands.

"Tell me what's really going on. That message earlier—"

"Was nothing." She cuts me off, but her eyes flick away, confirming my suspicion. "Just work stress."

"Savannah—"

"Please." She places her hands over mine, gently removing them from her face. "I'm asking for a little time. Just until after the launch."

I want to push. Want to demand the truth about whatever she's hiding. But the vulnerability in her eyes stops me. Whatever battle she's fighting, forcing her to reveal it now would only push her further away.

"Alright," I say finally. "Space until the launch. But after—"

"After, we talk," she agrees. "About everything."

I nod, stepping back to give her the distance she's asking for.

"I meant what I said this morning. About what matters."

Her eyes flicker with some emotion like fear or pain,

maybe both.

“I know you did. That’s what scares me.”

Before I can respond, she’s gathering the last of her papers, sliding them into her bag with trembling hands.

“Goodnight, Bash.” She brushes past me, the scent of lavender lingering in her wake.

I watch her go, a strange hollowness expanding in my chest. For the first time since this began, I feel like I’m losing her, even as she’s finally within reach.

The conference room feels suddenly empty, blueprints and samples scattered across the table like evidence of something unfinished. I move to the window, watching evening settle over Manhattan, lights flickering on in a thousand windows across the skyline.

I kissed her in front of Rodriguez this morning. Made my intentions clear. Showed her, and the world, exactly what she means to me.

And in response, she’s pulling away.

The realization hits me with unexpected force: I’ve completely let down my guard. Somewhere between that first night at the Regent and this morning’s kiss, I stopped protecting myself. Stopped calculating risks and angles and exits. I’m all in—heart exposed, defenses down.

And I have no idea what I’m walking into.

My phone buzzes with a text from Xander.

Meeting tomorrow, 8 AM. Bring the final Imperial Club numbers.

I type back a quick acknowledgment, my mind still on Savannah. On the fear I glimpsed in her eyes. On the secrets she’s keeping.

Four weeks until the launch. Four weeks until she promised we’d talk about “*everything*.”

Empire of Desire

I have a sinking feeling that whatever “everything” entails, it’s bigger than I imagined. And for the first time in my life, I’m facing it completely unarmed.

I thought the hardest battles were over: winning her trust, breaking through her defenses, finding our rhythm together. But standing here now, watching night fall over the city, I’m struck by the certainty that the war has only just begun.

And my heart is already in the open.

Chapter Twenty-One

Savannah

Dawn breaks over Manhattan as I slip through the Imperial Club's service entrance. The time on my phone reads 7:03 AM—nearly an hour before I'm due at Xander's strategy meeting. But I needed this moment alone.

My footsteps echo through empty corridors until I reach the ballroom doors. I push them open, and my breath catches.

Morning light floods the massive space, transforming it from construction site to cathedral. Without the chaos of workers, designers, and Bash's commanding presence, the room feels both vulnerable and powerful—like a sleeping giant waiting to awaken.

I stand perfectly still at the threshold, absorbing the silence that will soon be filled with the sounds of New York's elite. This space is pure potential. Raw. Unfinished. Beautiful.

Just like everything between Bash and me.

I step inside, each click of my heel against marble punctuating a thought I can't escape: *I've fallen in love with the man I was sent to destroy.*

The ballroom is nearly complete. The bones are there—soaring ceiling, massive windows, the framework for what will be the most beautiful space in Manhattan when we're done. When *we're* done. The thought catches in my chest, a sharp little pain I've stopped trying to ignore.

I run my fingers across the back of a half-upholstered chair, feeling the raw velvet beneath my fingertips. The fabric is rich, the color of aged bourbon, exactly the shade I argued for when the designer suggested something safer.

"Trust me," I'd said in that meeting, chin lifted, voice steady. "It'll catch the light in a way that makes people feel like they're sitting inside a glass of whiskey."

Bash had looked at me then, eyes bright with something that made my skin flush.

"Do it," he'd said to the designer, never taking his gaze off me. "She knows what she's talking about."

The memory warms me even now, standing alone in this unfinished cathedral to luxury and ambition.

I move toward the center of the ballroom, where the dance floor will be. The floor is uncovered for now, raw marble with veins of gold running through creamy white stone. My heels click against it, steady as a metronome.

I imagine string quartets filling this space during charity galas, exclusive members in evening wear sipping vintage champagne, polite laughter and business deals being struck in hushed corners. I imagine Bash in the center of it all, the perfect host in his tuxedo, proud and triumphant, finally silencing every critic who ever dismissed him as just another trust fund playboy.

I imagine myself at his side, where I belong.

Where I want to belong.

The thought stops me mid-step. I've been so careful not to let myself want this—want him—completely. Always

holding back, always keeping one foot pointed toward the exit. But standing here, surrounded by the physical manifestation of what we've built together, I can't sustain the lie anymore.

I cross to where the blueprints are still tacked to a massive board against the far wall. Among the technical drawings and measurements, there's a sketch I made months ago—a chandelier designed to look like crystal flowers blooming from the ceiling. I'd drawn it quickly one afternoon when Bash mentioned wanting something unique for the main ballroom.

"Not just expensive," he'd said. "Something no one's seen before."

I'd grabbed a pencil and sketched while he talked, not even fully aware of what I was creating until he went silent. The years of visualizing choreography, of understanding how bodies move through space—it translated to lines on paper more naturally than I'd expected. When I looked up, he was staring at my drawing, something like wonder in his expression.

"That," he'd said simply. "I want that."

Now I stare at the sketch, then up at the ceiling where the actual chandelier hangs, nearly complete. Crystal petals catch the morning light, sending prisms dancing across the unfinished walls. It's more beautiful than I'd imagined, more delicate and bold at once.

My fingers tremble as I trace the penciled petals on the blueprint. For once, it's not guilt that tightens my throat. It's pride. Pure, uncomplicated pride in what we've created.

"I love him."

The words leave my lips in a whisper, but in the empty ballroom, they might as well be a shout. I don't gasp. Don't clutch my chest like a woman in a Victorian novel having a

revelation. It's not dramatic because it isn't news—not to my heart. It's simply *true*. A truth too heavy to carry in silence anymore.

I love Sebastian Alderidge. Not just the billionaire who commands rooms with a glance. Not just the man who makes my body burn with a single touch. I love the man who stayed late arguing over blueprints, who defended my ideas to contractors who wouldn't look me in the eye, who believed in me when I'd stopped believing in myself.

I love him, and I've betrayed him, and those two truths can no longer exist side by side without tearing me apart.

My phone rings, the sound harsh and jarring in the peaceful space. I pull it from my pocket, staring at the blank screen. No name. No number. But I know who it is.

I answer anyway, pressing the phone to my ear without speaking.

"Ms. Bishop." Wolfe's voice is smooth as always. Controlled. No anger, no urgency. Just calm certainty that chills me more than rage ever could.

"I thought I might find you there. Admiring your handiwork?"

"What do you want?" The marble feels cold beneath my feet, even through my shoes.

"You know what I want." He pauses, and I can almost see him straightening his already perfect tie, adjusting his immaculate cuffs—the predator taking his time. "But it appears I won't be getting it."

My heartbeat picks up pace, but I keep my breathing even.

"I'm done, Wolfe."

"Yes," he says simply. "I rather thought you might be. The question is whether you're prepared for what comes next."

“Just say what you called to say.”

“You’ve made your choice. Now I make mine.” His voice softens, which somehow makes it more menacing. “You have until noon.”

The words hit me like a physical blow, but I refuse to let him hear it in my voice.

“Then what? What are you going to do?”

“Nothing that isn’t inevitable from the moment you chose him over our arrangement.” There’s a rustle of papers on his end.

“I had such high hopes for you, Ms. Bishop. Your talents are being wasted on a man who will never forgive you for what you’ve done.”

I grip the phone tighter, my breath caught somewhere between my lungs and throat. But my voice—my voice comes out solid, steady.

“Do it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Whatever you’re planning. Do it. I’m not afraid of you anymore.”

He chuckles, the sound devoid of any real humor.

“Bold words from a woman about to lose everything.”

“I’ve lost everything before,” I say, surprising myself with how calm I sound. “I survived.”

“But will he?” Wolfe asks, the question hanging in the air between us.

I think of Bash—his fierce determination, his brilliant mind, his capacity for both ruthlessness and tenderness.

“He’s stronger than you think.”

“Noon, Ms. Bishop,” he says, his voice dropping to a whisper that chills my blood. “Enjoy these last moments before your world burns.”

The line goes dead.

I lower the phone, staring at the blank screen for a long moment before slipping it back into my pocket. My hands should be shaking. My mind should be racing with ways to minimize the damage, to protect myself, to run.

Instead, I feel strangely calm.

I walk to the middle of the ballroom, where the grand chandelier will cast its light down on hundreds of guests in three weeks' time. I stand directly beneath it, looking up at the exposed rafters and the soft beams of light filtering through the high windows.

Tears rise, hot and insistent, but I blink them back. No more running. No more pretending.

I could call Bash right now. Could try to explain, to get ahead of whatever Wolfe is planning. But what would I say? That I was spying on him from the beginning? That I was planted in his path like a landmine, my job carefully crafted, all part of Wolfe's meticulous plan to infiltrate his life? That I let Wolfe manipulate me into betraying the one person who's shown me nothing but trust and belief?

The truth would hurt him more coming from me.

And maybe that's the coward's way out—letting the blow fall from someone else's hand. But I've made enough selfish choices. This one, at least, is for him.

I lift my chin, squaring my shoulders as I turn to face the massive doors at the entrance to the ballroom. In three weeks, they'll open to welcome New York's elite to the premier event of the season. Now, they stand partially finished, waiting for the final touches that will transform them from mere entryways to statements of arrival.

My phone buzzes with a text. Bash.

Where are you? Xander's meeting starts in 20.

Lily Rae

My thumb hovers over the screen, wanting to tell him everything. Wanting to hear his voice one more time before it all falls apart. But I can't. Not yet.

At the club. Final check on the chandelier installation. On my way.

Simple. True. A tiny fragment of honesty in a sea of lies. Three dots appear as he types back.

Everything okay?

No. Nothing is okay. Nothing will ever be okay again after I told Wolfe to do his worst.

Perfect. Just admiring your masterpiece.

The reply comes quickly.

Our masterpiece. You made it happen. See you soon.

I smile despite everything, warmth spreading through my chest at his praise. Even now, even unknowing, he builds me up. Sees me. Believes in me.

I type back.

Not taking credit. Just saying goodbye.

I stare at the words for a long moment, then delete them before he can see. Instead, I write.

On my way.

I pocket my phone without replying, the familiar nick-

name a knife between my ribs. He has no idea what's coming. No idea that I just lit the fuse on a bomb that will destroy everything between us.

The marble is cool beneath my palms as I lean against a half-finished column. The club smells of plaster dust, raw wood, and possibility. It's the scent of creation—of something magnificent taking shape under careful hands. Under my hands.

Whatever Wolfe does now, no one can take that away from me. I helped build this place. I poured myself into these walls, these floors, this soaring ceiling. My ideas. My vision. My heart.

"You fell in love with him," I say aloud, my voice echoing in the empty space. "You knew better, and you did it anyway."

There's no accusation in the words. No regret, either. Just acknowledgment of a truth that's been growing inside me since that first night at the Regent Hotel.

I push away from the column, moving toward the blueprints once more. My fingers trace the lines of the ballroom, the careful measurements, the places where Bash's handwriting appears alongside mine. We're all over these pages—our debates, our compromises, our shared vision.

In another life, we might have built something real. Something lasting.

I step back from the blueprints, surveying the ballroom one last time. The chandelier catches the light, sending prisms dancing across the marble floor. For a moment, I allow myself to imagine the space completed—filled with music and laughter, Bash at the center of it all, triumphant in his success.

I won't be there to see it. But I helped create it, and that has to be enough.

“I love you,” I whisper to the empty room, to the man who isn’t there. “And I’m sorry.”

The words hang in the air, suspended like dust motes in the beams of sunlight. Then I turn and walk away, my heels clicking against marble in a steady rhythm that sounds almost like resolve.

I check my watch—7:42. The meeting starts in eighteen minutes.

Time to face them all. To sit across from Bash at the conference table, to meet his eyes, to pretend I haven’t just sacrificed everything we might have been.

I smooth my skirt, check my reflection in a sheet of polished marble. The woman staring back at me looks collected, professional. Only I can see the fracture lines beneath her skin, the countdown clock ticking in her eyes.

Eighteen minutes until I walk into that meeting.

Five hours until Wolfe burns my world to ash.

I don’t look back as I push through the doors and into the hallway beyond. Don’t pause to memorize the details I might never see again. There’s no point in torturing myself with what might happen.

Instead, I walk with my head high, shoulders back, spine straight. The woman who entered this building to spy on Bash months ago no longer exists. In her place stands someone new—someone who knows exactly what she wants, even if she might lose it all.

Whatever Wolfe has planned for noon, I’ll face it. Because for the first time in my life, I’ve chosen something that matters more than survival.

I’ve chosen love.

And that makes me dangerous.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bash

I check my Rolex as I stride down the hallway toward the executive boardroom. 7:57 a.m. Three minutes early, which is practically late by Xander's standards.

The quarterly update on the Imperial Club isn't scheduled until 8:00, but my brother has probably been sitting in that room since 7:15, arranging the chairs at perfect right angles and aligning his tablet with the edge of the table.

Anal-retentive bastard.

My phone vibrates in my pocket—probably Savannah. Her last text said she was on her way from the club after checking on the chandelier installation.

She'd called it "my masterpiece," and I'd corrected her. *Our masterpiece*. Because that's what the Imperial Club has become—something we built together, something neither of us could have created alone.

Still, for once, I'm not dreading one of these corporate circle jerks. The Imperial Club is three weeks from launch, the chandelier Savannah designed is nearly complete, and the permit issues that almost derailed everything are firmly in the rearview. I've finally done what everyone said I

couldn't: turned my father's outdated social club into something revolutionary.

I adjust my tie, noticing with satisfaction that it's the exact shade of bourbon as the chairs Savannah insisted on for the ballroom. The memory of her defending that choice, chin raised, eyes blazing, sends warmth through my chest that has nothing to do with the coffee in my hand.

Last night flashes through my mind. Her skin against mine. The soft sounds she made when I kissed the spot just below her ear. The way she whispered my name, not Bash, but *Sebastian*, like a secret meant only for us.

I shake the thought away as I approach the boardroom. Later. We'll have time for that later.

The door swings open under my hand, and I step into the wall of silence that hits me like a physical force. My smile falters as I take in the scene.

Xander sits at the head of the table, his face a mask of cold professionalism. Lucas is beside him, eyes fixed on the surface of the glossy table. Four other board members occupy chairs around the perimeter, their expressions ranging from discomfort to morbid fascination.

No one speaks.

"Morning," I say, the word hanging awkwardly in the air. "Did someone die, or is this just how we're starting meetings now?"

No one laughs. Not even Lucas, who laughs at everything.

I move toward my usual seat, the one to Xander's right, but my brother stops me with a raised hand.

"Before you sit," Xander says, his voice clipped, "I need to address something."

I remain standing, coffee halfway to my lips.

“The Imperial Club update? That’s what we’re here for, right?”

“This is about the Imperial Club,” Xander confirms, and slides a file folder across the polished surface of the table. “But not in the way you’re expecting.”

The folder is slim, unmarked. The kind of nondescript packaging that usually contains information no one wants traced back to them. My stomach tightens as I set my coffee down and pick it up.

“What am I looking at?” I ask, not opening it yet.

Xander’s gaze is steady, unflinching.

“Evidence that suggests your project has been compromised from the inside.”

I flip open the folder, and the world tilts beneath my feet.

The first page is a photo. Savannah, sitting at a corner table in what looks like an upscale restaurant. Across from her, a silver-haired man in his sixties, impeccably dressed in what I’d bet is a bespoke suit. They’re leaning toward each other, her expression intent, his satisfied.

I know that face. James Wolfe. My father’s oldest rival, the man behind half the development scandals in Manhattan.

The man who’s been trying to sabotage the Imperial Club since day one.

“Turn the page,” Xander says quietly.

I do. The next document is a bank statement. A wire transfer from an offshore account to a GoFundMe page. Twenty-five thousand dollars to save a flower shop in Virginia. The date is three days before Savannah appeared in my office.

My fingers go numb.

The next page is an email. From Wolfe Development

Group's HR department to a recruitment agency, requesting a specific candidate for placement at Alderidge-Hathaway. Savannah's name is highlighted in yellow.

"There's more," Xander says.

I flip through the rest mechanically. Phone records showing calls between a blocked number and Savannah's cell. Dates and times of meetings that coincide with setbacks in the Imperial Club's development. A thread connecting Wolfe to the permit scandal that nearly tanked the entire project.

And at the end, a photo of Savannah entering Wolfe's private office building. Dated yesterday.

I close the file, my face carefully blank despite the storm raging inside me.

"Where did you get this?" My voice sounds distant, detached, like it's coming from someone else.

"Anonymous delivery this morning," Xander replies. "I had Drake verify the financial records and metadata on the photos. It's legitimate."

I set the folder down with exaggerated care, as if it might explode if handled roughly. In a way, it already has.

"The appearance of impropriety is undeniable," Xander continues, his tone measured. "The board needs to consider how to proceed."

I look at Lucas for the first time, finding my friend's face tight with concern.

"You're sure about this?" he asks softly, and the question cuts deeper than any accusation.

Because no, I didn't see it. Not a fucking hint of it. I was too busy falling for her.

"Mr. Alderidge," one of the board members starts, an older man whose name escapes me at the moment, "given

your... personal involvement with Ms. Bishop, we understand this is difficult—”

“My personal involvement has nothing to do with this,” I cut in, the words sharp enough to slice the thickened air. “If there’s evidence of corporate espionage, we deal with it. End of story.”

Xander’s eyebrow lifts slightly, the only indication he’s surprised by my composure. He doesn’t know I’m hanging onto it by my fingernails.

“The question remains,” another board member says, “what do we do about the Imperial Club? The launch is in three weeks.”

Before I can answer, the boardroom door opens.

Savannah steps in, a tablet clutched to her chest, her hair pulled back in the sleek bun she always wears to important meetings. Her eyes find mine immediately, brightening with that soft look I’ve come to crave more than my next breath.

“Sorry I’m late,” she says, moving to take her usual seat beside me. “The lighting designer had some last-minute—”

The words die on her lips as she registers the atmosphere in the room. Her eyes dart from face to face, landing finally on the closed folder in front of me.

“What’s going on?” she asks, her voice small.

I stare at her, searching for some sign, some tell that would confirm what’s in that folder. There’s nothing. Just confusion in those hazel-green eyes that watched me fall asleep last night. That looked into mine this morning as I kissed her goodbye.

Was it all an act? Every touch, every laugh, every fucking moment?

The silence stretches, taut as a wire about to snap. The

others are watching, waiting for my reaction. For my verdict.

“Get out.”

The words emerge low and precise, each syllable a bullet.

Savannah flinches as if I’ve slapped her. “What?”

“Get out,” I repeat, my voice deadly calm despite the hurricane inside me. “Now.”

“Sebastian,” she says, taking a step toward me, “I don’t understand—“

“Ms. Bishop,” Xander interrupts, “this is a closed board meeting. Your presence is not required.”

Her eyes never leave mine, bewilderment giving way to the first flickers of fear.

“Bash, please, what’s happening?”

I don’t answer. Can’t. If I open my mouth again, I might shatter completely, and I will not break in front of these people. In front of her.

Savannah’s gaze drops to the folder, then back to me. Something shifts in her expression, like realization dawning, followed by a flash of something I can’t name. Not guilt. Not defiance. Something closer to resignation.

She knows. Whatever’s in that folder, she knows it’s true.

The thought is physically painful, and I have to lock every muscle to keep from showing it.

“I see,” she says finally, her voice steady despite the slight tremor in her hands. “I’ll go, then.”

She turns, spine straight, shoulders back, and walks out without another word. The door closes behind her with a soft click that echoes in my skull like a gunshot.

I don’t watch her leave. Don’t trust myself to look at her

without either dragging her back or putting my fist through a wall.

Instead, I pick up my coffee cup and take a deliberate sip. The liquid is cold now, bitter on my tongue. I set it down precisely, aligning it with the edge of the table.

“So,” I say, my voice betraying nothing of the devastation beneath it, “what’s the damage assessment?”

The board members exchange glances, clearly thrown by my apparent composure.

“The primary concern,” Xander says carefully, “is the extent of the information compromise. If Wolfe has details about the Club’s security systems, financial structure, or key investors—”

“He doesn’t,” I interrupt. “Savannah had access to the design elements, scheduling, and surface-level financials. Nothing that would give him leverage over our investors or compromise security.”

It’s a lie. She had access to everything. I gave her everything.

“Even so,” Xander continues, “the optics are concerning. Your... relationship with her complicates matters further.”

My jaw tightens, the only external sign of the rage building inside me.

“My relationship with Ms. Bishop is irrelevant to this discussion.”

“With respect,” Lucas finally speaks up, his voice gentler than the others, “we should consider all angles before rushing to conclusions.”

I turn to him slowly, letting my gaze cut through him like a blade.

“What exactly are you suggesting, Lucas?”

Lucas holds my stare, one of the few people brave enough to do so when I'm like this.

"About what's really going on here. This doesn't seem like Savannah, Bash. There's got to be more to the story."

His defense of her only fuels my anger, but I don't let it show.

"The Imperial Club will launch in three weeks as scheduled. Ms. Bishop's contributions have already been implemented. Her removal changes nothing about the timeline."

"Sebastian," Xander says, using my full name in a rare display of brotherly concern rather than professional distance, "the board feels it might be prudent for you to step back from direct oversight of the launch."

For the first time since opening that folder, genuine surprise breaks through my forced composure.

"You're pulling me from my own project?"

"Temporarily," Xander clarifies. "Until we assess the full extent of the compromise and ensure the launch proceeds without incident."

I should argue, remind them that the Imperial Club is *mine*—my vision, my design, my redemption in the eyes of a family that's always seen me as the fuckup. I should fight for it with every weapon in my arsenal.

But I'm bleeding out internally, and the battle feels hollow.

"Fine," I say flatly. "Lucas can oversee the final preparations."

Lucas looks as shocked as everyone else at my easy capitulation.

"Bash—"

"You know the project inside and out," I cut him off. "You can handle three weeks."

I stand, buttoning my suit jacket with steady fingers that belie the tremor in my soul.

“If there’s nothing else, I have calls to make.”

“Sebastian,” Xander starts, concern finally breaking through his professional veneer.

I hold up a hand, stopping him. “Not now, Xander.”

My brother studies me for a long moment, then nods once. He understands. In private, he might offer sympathy, might even try to help me process this betrayal. But here, in front of the board, he’ll give me the dignity of retreat.

I walk out without another word, my footsteps measured and unhurried despite the urgent need to be anywhere but here. The hallway stretches before me like a gauntlet, every step an exercise in control.

I don’t look for her. Don’t check her desk or the break room or any of the other places she might have gone. I can’t face her yet. Can’t trust myself with what I might say—or do.

Instead, I head for the executive elevator, the one that requires a key card and goes straight to the parking garage. As the doors slide closed, sealing me in blissful isolation, I finally let my control slip.

My fist connects with the elevator wall, the impact sending shockwaves of pain up my arm. I welcome it. Physical pain is simple, clean. Nothing like the acid eating through my chest.

I trusted her. With my project. With my family’s legacy. With parts of myself I’ve never shown anyone else. And all along, she was Wolfe’s puppet. His spy. His weapon aimed at the heart of everything I’ve worked for.

The elevator reaches the garage, and I stride to my car, unlocking it with a remote click that echoes in the concrete space. I slide behind the wheel, grip it with white knuckles,

and sit there, engine silent, breathing through clenched teeth.

I should have known better. Everyone has an angle. Everyone wants something from the Alderidge name, the Alderidge fortune. Why would Savannah be any different?

Because I thought she saw me. Not the playboy. Not the heir. Not the fuckup youngest brother. Me.

What a goddamn joke.

I start the car, the engine coming to life with a growl that matches the one building in my chest. I need to get out of here. Need to go somewhere I can think, plan, and figure out how to salvage what's left of the Imperial Club and my shredded pride.

As I pull out of the parking garage, my phone buzzes with a text. I glance at it automatically, a habit I can't break even now.

It's Savannah.

Please let me explain. It's not what you think.

My thumb hovers over the screen for a moment. I could call her. Could demand answers. Could let her try to justify betraying me, betraying us.

Instead, I toss the phone onto the passenger seat without replying.

What could she possibly say? That it was all a misunderstanding? That the photos were doctored, the financial records fake, the timeline a coincidence?

Or would she admit it? Confess that yes, she was working for Wolfe, but somewhere along the way the job became real, the feelings became real?

I don't know which would be worse—the lies continuing or learning it was all just a job to her.

Empire of Desire

The city blurs around me as I drive, no destination in mind, just the need to move, to escape the suffocating weight of what's happened. Rain starts to fall, light at first, then heavier, matching my darkening thoughts.

I never asked her if it was true. Didn't need to. The moment she saw that folder, the look in her eyes told me everything. Not surprise at the accusation but resignation at being caught.

She knew exactly what was in that folder. Knew exactly what it meant.

And when she walked out? I watched her go.

The woman who made me believe in something more.
The woman I almost trusted with everything.

The woman who was playing me all along.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. One thing's for damn sure—I won't make the mistake of trusting someone like that again.

An Alderidge learns from his enemies.

Even when they come disguised as everything he ever wanted.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Savannah

Manhattan's indifferent chaos greets me as I step onto the sidewalk outside Alderidge-Hathaway. Yellow cabs honk. Pedestrians push past. The rhythm of the city continues, unaware that my world has just imploded. The contrast is almost offensive—how dare life continue when mine has stopped?

I clutch my bag against my side, the few personal items I grabbed from my office shifting inside. There wasn't much to take: a small potted succulent from Tessa, a spare pair of heels, and my favorite mug. I left the rest behind, like the framed rendering of the ballroom chandelier. Like my dignity. Like my heart.

Get out.

Two words. Just two. But they keep echoing in my head, each repetition cutting deeper. The way Sebastian said them, low, controlled, each syllable precision-cut, still slices through me with surgical efficiency. They weren't shouted in anger but delivered with a cold finality that left no room for explanation or defense.

I've heard Sebastian angry before, frustrated, impatient,

even cold. But this was different. This was a stranger wearing his face, looking at me with eyes that held nothing. No warmth. No recognition. Just arctic emptiness where the man I love used to be.

I walk aimlessly, no destination in mind. Just away. Away from the towering glass edifice that housed my dreams for too brief a time. Away from the boardroom where Sebastian's eyes turned to ice. Away from the project that became my passion and the man who became my world.

My phone buzzes in my bag. I ignore it. Then it buzzes again. And again. A persistent reminder that the outside world exists, demanding attention I can't give.

When I finally fish it out, my screen shows three notifications.

Two texts from Wolfe.

Meeting canceled. We need to talk.

Then.

Told you this would happen.

One missed call from my mother.

The sight of Wolfe's name makes bile rise in my throat. His smug certainty, his confidence that Sebastian would turn on me is unbearable. I delete both messages without responding, my finger stabbing the screen with more force than necessary.

The movement causes me to stumble slightly, and I realize I've been walking for blocks without seeing anything. I'm somewhere in Midtown, surrounded by the rush-hour crush of bodies. A light rain has started, the fine

mist dampening my blouse, my hair, and my skin. I hadn't even noticed.

I look up, trying to orient myself. The street signs blur through unshed tears. East 42nd. I'm near Grand Central. Trains. Escape. The thought is tempting. I could just... go. Disappear. Start over somewhere new.

But where would I go? What would I do? And what about my mother? What about Bash?

The thought of him sends a fresh wave of pain crashing through me. The look on his face when he told me to get out... I've never seen anything so cold, so final. He didn't even ask if it was true. Didn't give me a chance to explain. He just... believed the worst.

And maybe that's what hurts most of all. After everything we shared, he was so quick to think I'd betrayed him. So ready to cast me aside.

I pull out my phone again, fingers hovering over the screen. Should I text him? Try to explain? But what would I say?

I'm sorry I took money from the man trying to destroy you, but it was to save my mom's shop, and by the way, I've been feeding him useless information for weeks because I fell in love with you instead?

No. It's too late for explanations. Too late for anything.

My phone buzzes again—my mother calling back. I can't talk to her. Not now. Not like this. She'll hear it in my voice, and then I'll have to tell her everything, and she'll blame herself, and I can't bear to add that weight to what I'm already carrying.

I swipe to decline the call, then immediately feel guilty. She'll worry. I should at least text her.

Sorry, Mama. In a meeting. Call you later.

The lie comes easily. Too easily. Lies have become my native language these past months. I lied to Wolfe about what I was learning from Bash. Lied to Bash about why I was really there. Lied to myself about how it would all end.

And now the truth is out, twisted and incomplete, and I've lost everything.

The rain intensifies, fat drops replacing the earlier mist. People around me open umbrellas, duck into doorways, or hail cabs. I just stand there, letting the water soak through my silk blouse, plaster my hair to my scalp, and run down my face like the tears I still can't seem to shed.

Where do I go now? My Brooklyn apartment feels too far, too empty. I can't face those walls, that silence, not today. Not alone.

Without conscious decision, my feet turn west, toward a neighborhood of brownstones and tree-lined streets. Toward the only sanctuary left to me.

Tessa's.

By the time I reach her building, I'm soaked through. My shoes squelch with each step, my clothes cling uncomfortably, and my teeth have started to chatter. I probably look like a drowned rat. I certainly feel like one—bedraggled, pathetic, unwanted.

I press her buzzer with a trembling finger.

"Yeah?" Her voice crackles through the intercom, distorted but familiar.

"It's me," I manage, the words barely audible over the rain.

There's a pause, then the door buzzes. No questions. No hesitation. Just entry granted, sanctuary offered.

I climb the four flights to her apartment, each step heavier than the last. By the time I reach her door, it's

already open, Tessa's silhouette framed in the warm light from within.

One look at my face and she knows. Not the details, but enough. Her expression shifts from curiosity to concern to fierce protectiveness in the span of seconds.

"Jesus, Savannah," she says, pulling me inside. "You're soaked."

I nod mutely, standing on her welcome mat, rain dripping from my clothes onto the hardwood floor.

"Stay there," she commands, disappearing into her bedroom. She returns moments later with a towel and a bundle of clothes.

"Bathroom. Change. Now."

I obey, grateful for the simple instructions and lack of questions. In the small bathroom, I peel off my wet clothes, letting them fall to the tile with soft, wet sounds. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and barely recognize the woman staring back.

Pale face. Red-rimmed eyes. Hair plastered to my skull. I look like I've been through a war.

Maybe I have.

Tessa's clothes are too big for me—a faded NYU sweat-shirt and soft leggings—but they're dry and warm. I towel my hair roughly, not caring that it will dry in a mess of frizz and tangles. What does it matter now?

When I emerge, Tessa has a steaming mug waiting on the coffee table. Tea, not coffee. She knows me well enough to know when I need comfort over caffeine.

I sink onto her couch, curling my legs beneath me, accepting the mug with hands that still tremble slightly. The warmth seeps through my palms, up my arms, but doesn't reach the cold core of me.

Tessa sits beside me, close but not touching, respecting the fragility of my composure.

“Want to talk about it?” she asks finally.

I take a sip of tea before answering. Chamomile, with honey and a hint of lemon. It feels both familiar and safe.

“He didn’t even let me speak,” I say, the words barely above a whisper.

Tessa waits, patient in a way few people know she can be.

I look up at her, guilt twisting my stomach.

“Tess, there’s so much I haven’t told you.”

Her eyes soften. “I figured.”

“Bash and I—” My voice catches. “We were together. Actually together. Not just boss and assistant.” The confession rushes out, almost a relief after months of secrecy.

“And Wolfe—James Wolfe—he’s been blackmailing me for information about the Imperial Club. That anonymous donation to my mom’s shop? It was him. He orchestrated everything, my job at Alderidge, all of it.”

Tessa’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t interrupt.

“I’ve been feeding him useless information, trying to protect Bash while keeping my mom safe.” I swallow hard. “But today they found out. There was a folder,” I continue. “Photos. Bank records. Everything Wolfe had on me, laid out for the entire board to see.” I swallow hard. “Bash just looked at me and said, ‘Get out.’ Like I was nothing. Like I meant nothing.”

“What exactly did they have?” Tessa asks, her tone careful.

I shrug, a small, defeated gesture.

“Everything. The donation to Mama’s shop. My placement at Alderidge-Hathaway. Meetings with Wolfe. I’m sure it was all there.”

“But not the context,” Tessa says, anger edging into her voice. “Not the blackmail. Not the fact that you’ve been protecting them by feeding Wolfe useless crap for weeks.”

“Does it matter?” I ask, staring into my tea. “The evidence was damning enough. And Bash...” My voice catches. “He just believed it. All of it. Without question.”

“Because his family has a file on you?” Tessa explodes, jumping to her feet. “Without even asking your side? What kind of bullshit is that?”

“It looked bad, Tess,” I say softly. “Really bad.”

“I don’t care how it looked! He should have at least given you a chance to explain!”

I shake my head, unable to articulate the devastation of that moment, of seeing the coldness in Sebastian’s eyes with the absolute certainty that I had betrayed him.

“You don’t understand. The way he looked at me... like I was poison.”

Tessa sits back down, taking my hand in hers.

“I’m sorry, Vee. I’m so sorry.”

“I was trying to protect him,” I whisper, the truth I couldn’t say earlier finally breaking free. “And he looked at me like I was the enemy.”

My phone buzzes again from inside my bag, the sound muffled but insistent. Tessa retrieves it, checking the screen.

“Your mom again,” she says, holding it out to me.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself, then accept the call.

“Hi, Mama,” I say, forcing lightness into my voice.

“Savannah Marie Bishop,” my mother’s voice fills the line, concern evident even through the static. “I’ve called you three times today. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Just busy. It’s been a long week.”

“You sound strange,” she says, her maternal radar

cutting through my facade. "Are you coming down with something?"

I close my eyes, grateful she can't see my face.

"I'm just tired. Really."

"Is it that handsome boss of yours working you too hard?" she asks, and the innocent question lances through me like a physical pain.

"Something like that," I manage. "Listen, Mama, can I call you tomorrow? I'm at Tessa's, and we're about to have dinner."

"Of course, sweetheart," she says, clearly not convinced but willing to let it go for now. "Love you."

"Love you too," I reply, ending the call before my voice can betray me.

As soon as the screen goes dark, the tears finally come. Not in a dramatic flood, but in slow, silent trails down my cheeks. I don't sob or wail. I just... leak, as if my body can no longer contain the grief inside it.

Tessa doesn't speak. She simply slides closer, wrapping an arm around my shoulders, letting me lean into her warmth. We sit like that for a long time, the only sounds my occasional sniffles and the soft patter of rain against the windows.

"He believed the worst version of me," I finally say, staring at nothing. "And maybe that's what I deserved."

"Don't you dare," Tessa says fiercely. "Don't you dare take the blame for this. You did what you had to do for your mom. And then you tried to protect him too. You're not the villain here."

"Aren't I, though?" I ask, wiping at my cheeks. "I took Wolfe's money. I lied to Bash from day one. I let him fall for someone who didn't exist."

"That's not true," Tessa argues. "The woman he fell for

is exactly who you are—smart, talented, passionate. The circumstances of how you met don't change that."

I shake my head, unconvinced.

"It doesn't matter now anyway. It's over."

"So what are you going to do?" Tessa asks after a moment.

It's a simple question with no simple answer. What am I going to do? My job is gone. My relationship is over. My secret is out. At least, the damning parts of it are. I'm back at square one, but with more baggage, more pain, and more loss.

"I don't know," I admit. "I just... I don't know."

Tessa squeezes my shoulder.

"You don't have to figure it out tonight. Stay here. Sleep. Things will look clearer in the morning."

But I don't think they will. Nothing about this situation will magically resolve overnight. Bash won't suddenly call, demanding explanations. Wolfe won't disappear.

Still, I nod, grateful for the reprieve, for the permission to simply exist in this moment of wreckage without having to immediately rebuild.

Later, after a dinner I barely touch and a shower that fails to wash away the hollow feeling in my chest, Tessa tucks a blanket around me on her couch. I curl into it like armor, drawing my knees to my chest, making myself as small as possible.

"Try to sleep," she says, brushing a hand over my still-damp hair. "I'm right down the hall if you need anything."

I nod, knowing sleep will be elusive tonight. But I'm grateful for the darkness, the quiet, and the chance to be broken in private.

After Tessa's bedroom door closes, I stare at the ceiling, watching headlights from passing cars create shifting

patterns of light and shadow. My phone sits on the coffee table, silent now. No calls. No texts. No one looking for me.

Wolfe's words echo in my head: "*Told you this would happen.*"

He orchestrated the whole thing, dropping that file on the Alderidge doorstep with perfect timing. He's watching me lose everything and enjoying every moment of it.

But it's not Wolfe's manipulation that cuts deepest. It's Bash's silence. His immediate dismissal. The fact that after everything, after late nights working side by side, after passionate encounters that left us both breathless, after quiet moments of vulnerability neither of us shared with anyone else—he could believe I would betray him so completely.

I wonder if he's thinking of me now, angry and hurt, or if he's already moved on, compartmentalized me as just another mistake in a long line of them.

The thought breaks something loose inside me, and fresh tears spill onto the pillow. I let them fall, silent and unwitnessed.

I could have told him the truth from the beginning, confessed about Wolfe, about the blackmail, about my mother's shop. But I was afraid—of losing Bash, the job, of exposing my mom to Wolfe's revenge, and seeing disappointment in Bash's eyes.

So I kept silent. And my silence became a prison, walls building higher with every lie of omission, every moment I chose not to speak. Until today, when those walls came crashing down, burying us both in the rubble.

I let him think I was the villain. Because the truth would've broken him more than the lie ever could.

And now we're both broken anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Bash

Rain hammers against the windows of my office, turning Manhattan's morning skyline into a blurry watercolor painting. Streaks of water race down the glass—some fast, some slow, some merging into larger streams before disappearing from view.

I've been watching them for hours. Tracking their paths. Making silent bets on which droplet will reach the bottom first.

It's better than thinking about her.

My desk is a battlefield of untouched work. Quarterly projections. Permit applications. Launch schedules for the Imperial Club. The bourbon beside my laptop is half-finished from last night, a ring of amber staining the bottom of the crystal tumbler. I never went home. Couldn't face the emptiness of my penthouse. Couldn't risk the memories waiting for me there.

Savannah curled against my chest, her hair spilling across my pillow.

Savannah laughing in my kitchen, wearing nothing but my shirt.

Savannah.

I slam the thought shut. Lock it away. Return to watching the rain.

The Imperial Club launch is in three weeks. The biggest project of my career, the thing I've poured myself into for months, the legacy I was building to prove myself worthy of the Alderidge name, and I can barely summon the energy to care. Everything feels distant. Hollow.

"IRIS, status update on the Imperial Club electrical inspection," I say, my voice scratchy from disuse.

"Electrical inspection passed at 8:42 this morning," IRIS responds, her tone carefully neutral. "Final health and safety review scheduled for tomorrow at 1 p.m."

Good news, but it sparks nothing in me. No satisfaction. No relief.

"Any messages?"

"Yes. Seventeen emails marked urgent, six voice messages, and three texts from your brother Eli inquiring about your well-being."

I don't ask her to read them. I don't want to hear Eli's concern or Xander's judgment or my mother's gentle probing. Don't want to hear anything except—

No. Not that either.

My office door flies open, banging against the wall with enough force to send my empty coffee cup rattling across the desk. Lucas stands in the doorway, his normally relaxed posture rigid with tension, his eyes burning with something I've never seen in him before.

Fury.

"What the hell was that yesterday?" he demands, not bothering with greetings.

I straighten in my chair, defenses rising automatically.

"You're going to need to be more specific."

“Don’t.” He steps inside, kicking the door closed behind him. “Don’t play dumb with me, Bash. Not today.”

“If you have something to say, Lucas, say it.”

He crosses the room in three long strides, plants both palms on my desk, and leans forward until we’re eye to eye.

“You didn’t even give her a chance to explain.”

The mention of Savannah, even indirectly, sends a fresh wave of anger through me.

“There was nothing to explain. She was connected to Wolfe.”

“She was connected to *you*,” Lucas fires back. “But you couldn’t see that, could you? Too busy protecting your damn pride.”

“Watch yourself,” I warn, voice dropping to a dangerous octave. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” Lucas straightens, crossing his arms. “I was there, remember? I saw those documents. I saw her face when you told her to get out. And yeah, it looked bad, but you know what looked worse? You not even asking for her side of the story.”

I push away from my desk, standing to meet his challenge.

“Her side? What side? The bank records speak for themselves. The meetings with Wolfe. The leaked information. What exactly am I missing here, Lucas?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the fact that she’s been killing herself for months to make this project a success? That she’s the one who solved the permit crisis when everyone else had given up? That she stayed late every night, worked weekends, and fought for this club like it was her own dream?”

I turn away, jaw clenched so tight it aches. “That was her job.”

“Bullshit,” Lucas snaps. “Her job was to be your assistant. Everything else—the design input, the vendor negotiations, the staff training—that was above and beyond. And you know it.”

“She was feeding information to Wolfe.”

“Was she? Because I’m not convinced,” Lucas says, his voice quieter but no less intense. “Think about it, Bash. If she was really Wolfe’s spy, why would she work so hard to make the Imperial Club a success? Why not just sabotage it from the inside? Why fight for permits, solve crises, pour her heart into a project she was supposedly trying to destroy?”

The question hangs in the air between us, uncomfortably sharp. I don’t have an answer. At least, not one I want to face.

“You didn’t even give her a chance,” Lucas repeats, softer now. “And that’s not like you.”

“You don’t know what it was like,” I say, hating the defensive edge in my voice. “Sitting in that boardroom, seeing those documents, realizing that everything between us might have been—”

“What? A lie?” Lucas interrupts. “Because from where I’m standing, the only person lying here might be you. To yourself.”

“Get out,” I say, the words eerily similar to the ones I spat at Savannah yesterday. But while those were cold and controlled, these come out ragged, almost pleading.

Lucas holds his ground. “No. Not until you hear me out.”

“I’m your boss,” I remind him. “And I’m telling you to leave.”

“You’re my friend,” he counters. “And I’m telling you you’re making the biggest mistake of your life.”

We stare at each other, locked in a silent battle of wills. Finally, Lucas shakes his head, disgust written across his features.

“Fine. Have it your way. Sit here in the dark, drinking yourself stupid, convincing yourself she was the villain. But when you finally pull your head out of your ass and realize what you’ve thrown away? Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He turns to leave, pausing at the door.

“For what it’s worth, I think she was the best thing that ever happened to you. And I think deep down, you know it too.”

The door closes behind him with a soft click that somehow hurts more than if he’d slammed it. The silence he leaves in his wake is deafening.

I sink back into my chair, Lucas’ words echoing in my head. The doubt they’ve planted takes root, spreading like poison.

“IRIS,” I say after a long moment. “Pull up Ms. Bishop’s file access logs for the past month.”

“Accessing data,” IRIS responds. A soft ping signals the information’s arrival on my laptop.

I stare at the screen, not touching the trackpad, suddenly afraid of what I might find. What if Lucas is right? What if I made a terrible mistake?

“Would you like me to display the information, Mr. Alderidge?” IRIS prompts after several seconds of inactivity.

“Yes,” I say, my voice barely audible. “Show me everything.”

The screen fills with data: timestamps, file names, and access points. I scan it quickly, looking for patterns, for evidence that might either damn or exonerate Savannah.

What I find stops my breath.

For the first two weeks of her employment, Savannah accessed files regularly after hours—project blueprints, vendor contracts, financial projections. Classic corporate espionage behavior. But then, abruptly, the after-hours access stopped. Completely. Six weeks ago.

Around the time things between us started to change. Around the time she kissed me back in this very office.

“IRIS, check for any outbound data transmissions from Ms. Bishop’s devices to external networks in the past six weeks.”

“Scanning,” IRIS says. Another ping. “No unauthorized data transmissions detected. Ms. Bishop’s communications were limited to approved Alderidge-Hathaway channels and personal communications unrelated to company business.”

I run a hand through my hair, disbelief warring with a growing sense of dread.

“Check her badge logs. Show me every time she entered my office after 8 p.m.”

The data appears instantly. Only one entry after hours: the night she stayed. The night everything changed.

My stomach twists. The evidence is mounting, and it doesn’t support what I believed yesterday. What I acted on.

“IRIS, pull the security footage from the liquor license crisis meeting three weeks ago.”

The video appears on my screen. Savannah sits at the conference table, surrounded by legal and administrative staff, all looking dejected. The permits for the Imperial Club’s liquor license had been stalled, threatening to delay the entire opening.

“*We’ve tried everything,*” the head of legal says in the recording. “*The inspector won’t budge without a complete electrical rework.*”

“That would set us back a month, minimum,” someone else argues.

And then Savannah speaks up, her voice clear and confident.

“What if we apply for a temporary event permit instead? It would cover the opening and give us the six weeks we need to complete the inspection without delaying the launch.”

The room falls silent, everyone turning to stare at her.

“That’s... actually brilliant,” the legal head admits. *“Why didn’t we think of that?”*

“Because you’re overcomplicating it,” Savannah replies with a small smile. *“Sometimes the simplest solution works best.”*

I remember that meeting, how she’d solved the problem before I could even ask her to find a solution. I remember the pride I’d felt watching her take command of the room.

Was that the action of someone trying to sabotage the project? Or someone fighting to save it?

“IRIS, access Savannah Bishop’s personal calendar for the past month.”

“Accessing,” IRIS says, then pauses. “I should note that this constitutes an invasion of Ms. Bishop’s privacy. Are you certain you wish to proceed?”

Her programming shouldn’t allow for moral judgments, but somehow IRIS manages to make me feel like I’m crossing a line. And maybe I am.

“Just show me any meetings with James Wolfe,” I amend.

The calendar appears, highlighting three meetings with Wolfe. All scheduled during her lunch hour. All marked with a single word: Unavoidable.

Not “Update.” Not “Project Discussion.”

Just “Unavoidable.” Like an obligation. A burden.

My chest tightens. Lucas's words echo.

"She was connected to you."

I lean back, staring at the ceiling, pieces clicking into place with sickening clarity. The way she appeared in my life so suddenly. Her reluctance to get close to me at first. The way Savannah always seemed to be walking a tightrope, torn between loyalty to the project and some invisible pressure I couldn't see.

What was Wolfe's game? What did he have over her? The questions burn through my mind, leaving ash in their wake.

And I never asked. Never gave her a chance to explain. Just condemned her on the spot, in front of everyone who mattered.

The office door opens again, more gently this time. Lucas returns, his anger replaced with something closer to resignation.

"Here," he says, tossing a folder onto my desk. "Thought you might want to see this."

I open it cautiously. Inside is a single document—a printout of an email from Savannah to James Wolfe, dated three weeks ago.

Mr. Wolfe,

I can no longer provide you with information about the Imperial Club project or any Alderidge-Hathaway business matters. Whatever leverage you believe you have over me, it's not worth the cost.

Do what you will with this decision, but I won't be meeting with you again.

Savannah Bishop

The timestamp matches exactly when the after-hours file access stopped. When her badge logs became strictly professional. When things between us deepened into something real.

She walked away from Wolfe. For what? For me? For herself?

And I threw her away without a second thought.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, voice hollow.

"IRIS flagged it during the security audit," Lucas says. "I was going to show you yesterday, but then everything went to hell."

I close the folder carefully, as if handling something precious and fragile.

"Why are you showing me this now?"

Lucas sighs, leaning against the doorframe.

"Because despite what an absolute ass you've been, you're still my friend. And I've never seen you look at anyone the way you looked at her—until yesterday, when you looked at her like she was a stranger."

"I thought—" My voice breaks. I clear my throat, try again. "I thought she betrayed me."

"Yeah, well, looks like the only betrayal here was yours," Lucas says, not unkindly. "Question is, what are you going to do about it?"

I don't have an answer. The weight of my mistake presses against my chest, making it hard to breathe. I destroyed something precious out of pride and fear and a lifetime of expecting the worst from people.

"She won't forgive me," I say finally.

"Probably not," Lucas agrees. "At least, not easily. But then again, nothing worth having comes easy, does it?"

He pushes off from the doorframe, heading back toward

the hallway. "If you want her back... you better figure out how to earn it."

The door closes behind him, leaving me alone with the evidence of my mistake. I pull out my phone, navigate to Savannah's contact. Her photo appears—a candid shot I took at the Imperial Club, her head thrown back in laughter, sunlight catching in her hair.

My thumb hovers over the call button. What would I even say?

The screen goes dark from inactivity. I let it.

Some mistakes can't be undone with a phone call. Some wounds run too deep for simple apologies.

I didn't ask. She didn't beg. And now I don't know if there's anything left to fix.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Savannah

I've never understood people who say time slows down during moments of crisis. For me, it accelerates, minutes blurring into seconds, hours collapsing into instants. The world speeds up when it's falling apart.

It's been three days since the boardroom, since Bash's eyes went cold and his voice turned to ice.

"Get out."

The words still rattle around my skull as I stand outside the steel and glass doors of Drake Blackwood's office. The Chief Technology Officer of Alderidge-Hathaway doesn't advertise his location; his corner of the fifty-fifth floor remains unmarked, accessible only to those with the right clearance or desperation.

I have the latter in spades.

My reflection stares back at me from the polished surface, hollow-eyed, pale, but composed. I've spent the last seventy-two hours cycling through rage, grief, and finally, clarity. I'm done hiding. Done running. Done being Wolfe's puppet.

I press my palm against the biometric scanner. The light

flashes red, then yellow, then green. The door slides open with a whisper.

“I didn’t think you’d still have access,” I say to the empty air as I step inside.

“Ms. Bishop.” IRIS’s voice fills the space, smooth and neutral. “Mr. Blackwood was expecting you.”

Of course he was. The man built the most sophisticated AI security system in the corporate world. He probably knew I was coming before I did.

Drake’s office is a study in minimalist precision with matte black surfaces, chrome accents, and wall-to-wall screens displaying scrolling code I can’t begin to comprehend. No artwork. No plants. No distractions.

The man himself sits with his back to me, fingers flying over three separate keyboards, his reflection visible in the dark glass of the window. He doesn’t turn around.

“You’ve got five minutes,” he says, voice clipped. “Make them count.”

I don’t waste time with pleasantries. “I need your help.”

“That much is obvious.” His typing never slows. “What’s less obvious is why I should give it.”

“Because this isn’t about me.” I move closer, stopping at the edge of his desk. “It’s about protecting Bash.”

Now he turns, dark eyes assessing me with cool precision. Drake Blackwood doesn’t look like your typical tech genius—no rumpled clothes or nervous energy. He’s all sharp edges and restrained power, like a weapon disguised as a man.

“Interesting approach,” he says. “Especially since you’re the reason he needs protection.”

I don’t flinch.

“I’m the reason Wolfe got as far as he did. I’m also the reason he won’t get any further.”

“Bold claim.” His gaze flicks to my hands, noting their steadiness. “What exactly do you think I can do that legal can’t?”

I slide my phone across his desk. The screen displays Wolfe’s last message, sent yesterday morning.

You disappoint me, Savannah. I expected more loyalty after everything I’ve done for your mother. Remember our arrangement—the money can disappear as easily as it appeared. One word from me, and Betty’s little shop becomes a parking lot by Christmas.

But I’m willing to be generous. One final task. Tomorrow night, the Imperial Club’s security system will have a scheduled maintenance window. All you need to do is leave a single door unlocked. That’s it. Then we’re done.

Don’t make me escalate this situation. No one walks away from me. Especially not for an Alderidge.

Drake reads it twice, his expression unchanging.

“And you want me to do what with this?”

“Trace it. Track the servers. Find whatever digital footprint Wolfe left behind.” I keep my voice steady. “I need evidence that connects him directly to the sabotage attempts.”

“Why not take this to the police?”

“Because I don’t have proof that connects him to anything except threatening me. And my word against his...” I let out a dry laugh. “Well, we both know how that would end.”

Drake tilts his head slightly, studying me.

“You realize that helping you could be seen as a conflict of interest. For all I know, this could be another trap.”

“It could be,” I agree. “But it isn’t.”

He taps a fingernail against the edge of my phone.

“Why come to me? Why not run? You’ve been fired.

Your reputation is ruined. Most people would cut their losses.”

“I’m not most people.”

“Clearly.” He swivels back to his screens. “Why should I believe you care about protecting Sebastian after everything that’s happened?”

The question hits harder than I expect, cracking the composure I’ve worked so hard to maintain.

“Because I love him,” I say, the words raw and painful. “And that didn’t stop just because he stopped believing in me.”

Drake’s fingers pause over the keyboard. For a long moment, the only sound is the soft hum of computers and the distant rumble of Manhattan traffic forty-three stories below.

“Five minutes are up,” he says finally.

My heart sinks. I reach for my phone, but his hand closes over it first.

“IRIS,” he calls out, “initiate Protocol Bloodhound on this device.”

“Initiating Protocol Bloodhound,” IRIS confirms. “Estimated completion time: seventeen minutes.”

Drake swivels his chair to face me fully.

“Sit,” he says, gesturing to the single chair across from his desk. “This will take a while.”

Relief washes through me so suddenly I almost sway. I sink into the chair, watching as one of his screens fills with data: IP addresses, timestamps, and connection points.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

Drake’s expression doesn’t soften, but something in his eyes shifts.

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m not doing this for you.”

“I know.” I fold my hands in my lap. “You’re doing it for him.”

“I’m doing it for the company,” he corrects. “Wolfe has been a thorn in our side for years. If your phone gives us what we need to neutralize him, then your motives are irrelevant.”

I don’t argue or explain that my motives are the only thing I have left that’s truly mine. Instead, I watch as IRIS works, pulling digital threads that connect Wolfe to his network.

“How long have you known?” Drake asks after several minutes of silence.

“About Wolfe?”

“About his involvement with your mother’s shop.”

I glance up sharply. “How did you—”

“IRIS flagged suspicious activity on your mother’s bank account just before you started working here. Anonymous donation from an offshore account linked to a shell corporation.” He shrugs. “Standard monitoring protocol for all executive staff.”

“I’m not executive staff.”

“You were sleeping with one. Close enough.”

Heat rises to my face, but I push past it.

“I found out the day I was hired. The donation came through a week earlier. I didn’t know it was Wolfe until he called me that night.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone.” It’s not a question.

“Who would I tell? The man who hired me under false pretenses? The executives who would’ve fired me on the spot?” I shake my head. “My mother would’ve lost everything.”

“So you chose to spy instead.”

“At first,” I admit. “For two weeks, I fed him informa-

tion—nothing critical, just enough to buy time while I looked for another solution.” I look down at my hands. “Then things changed.”

“You mean you fell for Bash.”

My throat tightens. “I mean I realized I couldn’t keep betraying someone who trusted me. So I stopped. I told Wolfe I was done.”

Drake raises an eyebrow. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” I meet his gaze steadily. “I was prepared to lose my job. To face the consequences. What I wasn’t prepared for was—“

“Falling in love,” he finishes.

“Having it thrown back in my face,” I correct him. “Finding out that trust only goes one way.”

Something flickers across Drake’s face, recognition, maybe. Or respect. He turns back to his screens just as IRIS pings softly.

“Preliminary analysis complete,” she announces.

The center screen fills with data points, connections branching like a digital web. Drake leans forward, fingers flying as he navigates through layers of information.

“Well, well,” he murmurs. “Wolfe’s been busy.”

I stand, moving closer to see what he’s found. The screen shows financial records, shell companies, money transfers to familiar names: the brunette from the scandal photos, Pierce Kane from the permit office, even a junior engineer from the electrical team.

“He’s been orchestrating this for months,” I breathe, scanning the dates. “The club never had a chance.”

“Not quite,” Drake counters, highlighting a section of data. “Look at the timeline. The sabotage attempts escalated dramatically after you stopped feeding him information. He

was counting on you as his inside source, and when you cut him off..."

"He had to find other ways in," I finish. "More expensive ways."

"Exactly." Drake pulls up another screen. "And he got sloppy. Left digital fingerprints all over these transactions."

Hope flickers to life in my chest. "Is it enough?"

"For a criminal investigation? Maybe." Drake's fingers continue to dance across the keyboard. "For corporate action? Definitely."

He compiles everything into a single folder: emails, bank records, phone logs, and metadata. Then he turns to me.

"What do you want to do with this?" he asks.

The question catches me off guard.

"I thought you'd take it straight to Xander."

"I could," he agrees. "But this is your evidence. Your redemption, if you want it."

Redemption. The word hangs between us, tempting and terrifying. I could walk back into that boardroom with this folder, force them all to see the truth, and make Bash look me in the eye as he realizes his mistake.

But that's not why I came here.

"Send it anonymously to legal," I say finally. "No names. No credit."

Drake studies me, surprise evident in his eyes.

"You don't want them to know it came from you."

"I want Bash protected. I want Wolfe stopped." I step back from the desk. "That's all that matters now."

"And what about clearing your name?"

I laugh softly, the sound hollow even to my own ears.

"My name was never clean to begin with. I made my choices. I'll live with them."

Drake considers this, then nods once.

“As you wish.” He taps a few keys, and the file disappears from the screen. “It’s done.”

“Thank you.” I turn to leave, then pause at the door. “Can you do one more thing for me?”

“Depends what it is.”

“Don’t tell him it was me.” The request costs me more than I thought possible. “Let him think it was you, or IRIS, or anyone else.”

Drake’s expression is unreadable. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want his gratitude. And I don’t want his guilt.” I swallow hard. “I just want him safe.”

After a long moment, Drake inclines his head slightly.

“I won’t tell him.”

I nod once, then step through the door, leaving behind the last thread connecting me to Alderidge-Hathaway and the man I love.

EIGHT HOURS AND ONE PLANE TICKET LATER, I STAND on my Mama’s porch in rural Virginia. The evening air smells of honeysuckle and freshly cut grass, so different from Manhattan’s concrete and glass that it feels like stepping into another world.

Bishop Blooms sits quiet across the street, its faded awning rippling gently in the breeze. Tomorrow, Mama will open at six, arranging bouquets and chatting with customers who’ve known her since before I was born. The simplicity of it washes over me like a balm.

The screen door creaks as I push it open. Inside, the house smells of vanilla and yeast. Mama’s baking again, a

sure sign she's worried. The kitchen light spills into the hallway, and I follow it like a beacon.

"Savannah?" Mama looks up from the counter, flour dusting her hands and forearms. Her eyes widen as she takes me in. "What are you doing home? Is everything okay?"

There are a thousand ways I could answer that question. I could lie, tell her everything's fine, that I'm just visiting. I could cry, fall apart in her arms the way I did after my dance career ended. I could rage against Bash, against Wolfe, against my own stupid heart.

Instead, I set down my bag and reach for a mixing bowl.

"Need some help?"

She studies me for a moment, seeing more than I want her to. Mama's always had that gift of reading the truth in my silences. But she doesn't push.

"Always," she says, sliding a lump of dough toward me. "This one needs kneading."

I wash my hands, then dig my fingers into the soft, yielding mass. The familiar motion grounds me, connecting me to this place, to the person I was before Manhattan and Bash and betrayal.

We work in comfortable silence for a while, the rhythmic sound of our hands shaping dough filling the kitchen.

"How long are you staying?" Mama asks eventually.

I don't look up. "I'm not sure yet."

"Your job?"

"It didn't work out."

She nods, accepting this without question.

"Well, Bishop Blooms could use an extra pair of hands. Summer wedding season is coming up."

The simple offer—a way forward, a place to belong—brings a lump to my throat.

“I’d like that.”

Mama brushes flour from her cheek, leaving a white streak behind.

“Whatever happened in New York... it doesn’t follow you here. You know that, right?”

But she’s wrong. It does follow me, in the weight of my phone in my pocket, in the memory of Bash’s face when he told me to leave, and in the knowledge that I helped set all of this in motion. Those things live inside me now, as much a part of me as my bones.

“I know,” I lie, forcing a smile.

Later, when the bread is rising and Mama has gone to bed, I sit on the back porch steps, staring up at stars you can’t see in Manhattan. My phone sits heavy in my palm. There are no calls or messages, not even from Tessa. I’ve become a ghost in my own life.

I scroll to Bash’s contact, my thumb hovering over his name. What would I even say?

I’m sorry I betrayed you, but I tried to make it right? I love you, even though you couldn’t trust me enough to listen?

My throat tightens as I realize the truth—there are no words that can bridge this gap. What we had is shattered, and no carefully crafted text message can glue it back together.

But as I tuck the phone away and look up at the vast, star-filled sky, I whisper words meant for no one but myself.

“This I can fix.”

Not us. Not the past. But the future, Bash’s future, free from Wolfe’s shadow. The Imperial Club, standing tall without sabotage. The dream we both believed in, even if we can’t share it anymore.

I've lost everything else. But I won't lose this chance to do one thing right, even if Bash never knows it was me.

Tomorrow, Alderidge-Hathaway legal will receive the evidence, and Wolfe's plans will begin to unravel. Tomorrow, the man I love will be one step closer to the success he deserves.

And I'll be here, kneading dough and arranging flowers, finding my way back to the woman I used to be before I learned how easily love can turn to ash.

The night air wraps around me like a promise, not of forgiveness or redemption, but of survival. Of moving forward, one breath at a time.

Bash's voice echoes in my memory.

"We build what lasts, Savannah."

He was talking about the Imperial Club, but maybe he was right about more than that. Maybe we build what lasts inside ourselves too—strength from suffering, wisdom from mistakes, courage from heartbreak.

I close my eyes, letting the Virginia night seep into my bones. For the first time in days, I feel something like peace.

Wolfe hasn't made his final move. And neither have I.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Bash

The rain taps against the windows like impatient fingers, each droplet racing down the glass in erratic patterns. I've been watching them for hours, tracking their descent as the night faded into a pallid excuse for morning. The sky hangs low and heavy over Manhattan, a perfect mirror to the weight in my chest.

I haven't slept. Not really. Maybe an hour here or there, collapsing onto my couch fully dressed only to jolt awake with her name on my lips.

Savannah.

I ordered her out of the boardroom four days ago, convincing myself that I did the right thing.

My office feels too large this morning, too empty. I've always liked the minimalist design: clean lines, dark surfaces, nothing unnecessary. Now it just feels hollow, like everything else.

The coffee Lucas brought sits untouched on my desk, gone cold hours ago. I should drink it anyway. I should review the pending permits for the Imperial Club. I should

call Xander back. I should do anything except stare at raindrops and think about her eyes when I told her to leave.

My laptop pings softly. Another email. Probably Xander, demanding updates on the timeline now that we've "handled the security breach." That's what he's calling it—clinical, detached, a problem solved.

I turn from the window, dropping heavily into my chair. The movement sends a spike of pain through my temples, a reminder of the whiskey I used to chase away her memory last night. It didn't work. Nothing works.

The screen glows accusingly in the dim office. I scan my inbox, and my breath catches.

One new message. No subject. No sender name. Just an attachment.

My internal alarms should be blaring. Anonymous emails with attachments are exactly the kind of security risk Drake lectures us about. I should forward it to IT, let them scan it for viruses or malware or whatever the hell else might be lurking inside.

Instead, I click.

The file opens immediately; there's no password, no encryption, nothing standing between me and its contents. A folder structure appears, neatly organized into categories: Financial Records, Communications, Personnel, and Timeline.

I click on Financial Records first, and my screen fills with bank transfers, routing numbers, shell corporations. Names jump out at me: Pierce Kane from the permit office, Angela Mitchell from the security badge scandal, and three contractors from the electrical team.

And at the center of it all: Wolfe Development Group.

My heart thuds against my ribs as I click through document after document. Money trails lead from

offshore accounts to the exact people who've been sabotaging the Imperial Club for months. Each transaction is meticulous, each connection carefully obscured but now laid bare.

I open Communications next. Email chains, text messages, phone logs, all between Wolfe and his network of informants. I scroll faster, scanning dates and details, my breath coming quicker with each new piece of evidence.

And then I see her name.

Savannah Bishop.

My hand freezes over the trackpad. Part of me wants to slam the laptop shut, to cling to the narrative I've built in my head. She betrayed me. She was working for Wolfe all along. She was never who I thought she was.

I click.

A series of emails fills my screen—Bishop, S. to Wolfe, J. Drafts, never sent. Each one a variation on the same message:

I can't do this anymore. I'm done being your spy. Find someone else.

This ends now. I'm telling Bash everything.

The club's permits will be approved. You've lost.

There are dozens of them, dated over the past month, growing more defiant each time. Then a shift—actual sent messages, short and blunt.

No.

Not happening.

Leave him alone.

And finally, five days ago, the day before the boardroom:

Whatever you're planning, it won't work. I've kept copies of everything. Touch him or the club, and I'll burn you down with me.

I close my eyes, the implications overwhelming me. Savannah wasn't Wolfe's accomplice; she was his captive. And when she tried to break free, he framed her.

I scroll back to the Personnel folder and open it. Inside is a single document: Savannah's employment file. Not the sanitized HR version, but something much more detailed. Background check. Financial status. Family connections.

My stomach twists as I read:

Subject: Savannah Marie Bishop

Age: 25

Family: Betty Anne Bishop (mother), owner of Bishop Blooms, Langford, Virginia. Widow.

Financial status: Precarious. Shop facing foreclosure until anonymous donation of \$25,000 via GoFundMe.

The date matches exactly one week before Savannah was hired.

I click back to the Financial Records folder, searching for that same date. There it is, \$25,000 transferred from one of Wolfe's shell companies to a temporary account, then routed to the GoFundMe platform.

"Jesus Christ," I whisper.

The pattern crystalizes with brutal clarity. Wolfe saved her mother's shop, then used that leverage to force Savannah to spy on me. But instead of complying, she pushed back. Protected me. Protected the club.

And I threw her out without a second thought.

I click on the last folder: Timeline. It's a single document, meticulously detailing Wolfe's campaign against the Imperial Club, and by extension, against me. The sabotage attempts, the scandal with the brunette from the permit office, and the security badge theft were all orchestrated by Wolfe, executed through a network of paid informants.

And at the bottom, I see a note embedded in the metadata.

You don't have to believe me. Just protect the club.

Her words. Her voice. I'd recognize it anywhere.

I stand up too fast, sending my chair screeching across the floor. My vision blurs at the edges, pulse hammering in my temples. The truth batters against my chest like a trapped bird. She was innocent. She was trying to protect me. And I condemned her without a hearing.

The worst kind of judge. The worst kind of man.

I grab my phone, scrolling to her contact. My thumb hovers over her name. What do I say?

I'm sorry I didn't trust you? I'm sorry I believed the worst without giving you a chance to explain?

It's not enough. Nothing would be enough.

I grab my jacket and storm out of my office, crossing the hall to Lucas' door without knocking.

He looks up, surprise flashing across his face.

"Bash? You look like hell."

"I need you to find her."

Lucas sets down his coffee, eyebrows drawing together.

"Find who?"

"Savannah."

"You fired her, Bash." His voice is carefully neutral, but I catch the quiet judgement in his undertone.

“I was wrong.” The words scrape my throat like glass. “I need to find her.”

Lucas leans back, studying me with narrowed eyes.

“Wrong how?”

“She wasn’t working for Wolfe. Not the way we thought.” I run a hand through my hair, aware I’m probably making it worse. “He was blackmailing her. Using her mother’s shop as leverage.”

“And you know this how?”

“Someone sent me files. Everything. The money trail from Wolfe to her mother’s GoFundMe, his communications network, all of it.”

Lucas’s eyes widen. “I knew something wasn’t right. Who sent it?”

“Anonymous.”

“About damn time.” Lucas leans forward, tension visibly leaving his shoulders. “I told you firing her didn’t make sense. Savannah isn’t—wasn’t—that person.”

“It’s real, Lucas. IRIS confirmed it. Savannah hasn’t accessed any Imperial Club files in weeks. No data breaches. Nothing sent to external accounts.” I pace the length of his office. “And Wolfe’s been threatening her.”

“Christ.” Lucas runs a hand through his hair. “Why didn’t she tell you what was happening?”

I stop, the question hitting harder than it should.

“Would you have believed her? Without proof?”

Lucas meets my gaze directly.

“I would have given her the chance to explain. Something you didn’t do.”

The blunt truth stings, but I can’t argue.

“You’re right. I didn’t even give her a chance. I just... cut her off.”

“So now what?” Lucas asks, already reaching for his laptop. “You find her, apologize, and then what?”

“I don’t expect things to go back to how they were.” I press my forehead against the cool glass. “I don’t have the right to ask for that. But I have to try to fix what I can.”

“And if she doesn’t want to be found?” His voice is gentle but direct.

The question lands like a blow. What right do I have to chase after her? To demand her forgiveness? To expect anything after what I’ve done?

None. But I’ll do it anyway.

“I need to know she’s okay,” I say finally. “Beyond that... it’s her choice.”

Lucas nods, determination replacing doubt.

“Where have you looked?”

“Her apartment in Brooklyn. Empty. Her friend Tessa’s place—no answer. Her phone goes straight to voicemail.” I turn back to face him. “It’s like she vanished.”

“People don’t vanish when they’re hurt, Bash. They go home.” His eyes soften with understanding. “Where’s home for her?”

“I need to find out.”

Lucas studies me for a long moment, his expression shifting from concern to something softer.

“You really care about her.”

It’s not a question, but I answer anyway.

“More than I realized until I lost her.”

He nods once, decision made.

“I’ll help. But Bash... you need to be prepared. She might not want to see you.”

“I know.”

“And you need to respect that.”

“I will.” The promise feels heavy on my tongue. “But first I need to find her.”

Lucas reaches for his phone.

“Start with her mother. That shop was important enough that Savannah let herself be blackmailed over it.”

“Bishop Blooms,” I say, the name coming back to me from the file. “In Langford, Virginia.”

“If she’s not there, her mother might know where she is.” Lucas is already typing on his laptop. “I’ll book you a flight.”

“No time.” I check my watch. “I’ll take the jet.”

Lucas looks up, eyebrows raised. “The company jet? For a personal matter?”

“I’ll reimburse Alderidge-Hathaway.” I move toward the door. “Call Drake. Tell him I need everything he has on Wolfe. And have IRIS lock down the Imperial Club’s systems—change all access codes, security protocols, everything.”

“You think Wolfe will make another move?”

“I know he will.” I pause at the threshold. “But this time, we’ll be ready.”

Lucas nods, already dialing.

“What do I tell Xander when he asks why you’ve disappeared?”

“Tell him I’m fixing my mistake.”

I step into the hallway, my mind racing ahead, planning, calculating. The jet can be ready in an hour. Langford is about one hour by air. I could be there by afternoon.

But what then? What do I say to the woman I cast aside without a hearing? The woman who tried to protect me, even as I condemned her?

I don’t know. But I have to try.

“Mr. Alderidge.” IRIS’s voice follows me down the corridor. “I’ve identified the source of the anonymous files.”

I stop short. “Who?”

“The data packet originated from Drake Blackwood’s secure server, but the files themselves were compiled using Ms. Bishop’s credentials. The upload occurred approximately eighteen hours ago.”

My heart thuds painfully. “She sent them?”

“Negative. Ms. Bishop has not accessed our systems since her termination. However, her phone data was used to authenticate the information.”

“She gave Drake the evidence,” I murmur. “She’s still trying to protect the club. To protect me.”

Even after everything I’ve done.

I duck back into Lucas’ office.

“Change of plans. I need Drake. Now.”

Lucas covers the mouthpiece of his phone.

“He’s not answering.”

“Keep trying.” I pull out my own phone, dialing Drake directly. It rings four times before connecting.

“This better be important, Alderidge.” Drake’s voice is cool and clipped.

“Savannah came to you.”

A pause. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the bullshit, Drake. IRIS traced the files back to your server. Savannah gave you the evidence against Wolfe.”

Another pause, longer this time. “And if she did?”

“I need to find her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to be found.”

“That’s her choice to make.” I grip the phone tighter. “But I have to try.”

“Why should I help you?” Drake’s voice hardens. “You didn’t even give her a chance to explain.”

The accusation stings because it’s true.

“I know. I fucked up. But I need to make it right.”

“Some things can’t be made right, Alderidge.”

“I have to try,” I repeat, desperation creeping into my voice. “Please, Drake. I just need to know where she is.”

The silence stretches so long I think he might have hung up. Then:

“Her mother’s flower shop. Bishop Blooms in Langford, Virginia. She took a commercial flight yesterday morning.”

Relief floods through me so intensely I have to grip the doorframe.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t make me regret this, Alderidge.” Drake’s voice is deadly serious. “She came to me to protect you, not to get you back. Remember that.”

“I will.”

“And Alderidge? She loves you. God knows why, but she does. Don’t waste it this time.”

The call disconnects before I can respond.

I turn to Lucas, who’s watching me with a mixture of concern and curiosity.

“Get the jet ready. I’m going to Virginia.”

“What about the club? Xander wants updates on the launch timeline now that the ‘*security breach*’ is handled.”

“The club will wait.” I check my watch again. “And Xander can wait too.”

“This isn’t like you, Bash.” Lucas’ voice carries a note of caution. “Taking off without a plan? Putting personal matters above Imperial club? That’s not the Sebastian Alderidge I know.”

“Maybe I’m not who I thought I was either.” I meet his gaze steadily. “Maybe none of us are.”

Lucas studies me for a long moment, then nods once.

“I’ll have the jet ready in thirty minutes. And I’ll handle Xander.”

“Thank you.”

As I turn to leave, Lucas calls after me:

“Bash? What are you going to say to her?”

I stop, the question hanging in the air between us. What could I possibly say that would matter? What words could bridge the chasm I created?

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I’ll start with the truth.”

“And what’s that?”

I look out at the rain-washed city, at the empire I’ve been so desperate to prove myself worthy of. It all seems smaller somehow, less important than the woman who stood beside me, who fought for me even when I failed her.

“That I failed her. That I was wrong.” My voice drops to barely above a whisper. “That I love her.”

Lucas is silent for a moment, then: “Good luck, boss.”

I nod once and step into the hallway, my purpose crystallizing with each stride. The Imperial Club, Xander’s expectations, Wolfe’s vendetta—all of it fades to background noise against the singular focus taking shape in my mind.

Find Savannah. Make this right.

I pull out my phone one more time, scrolling to her contact. I send a single text.

I know the truth. I’m coming for you.

I don’t expect a response. I don’t deserve one. But as the elevator doors close, my phone buzzes in my hand.

One word.

Don't.

My heart sinks, but my resolve hardens. She has every right to reject me, to shut me out the way I shut her out. But I owe her the truth, face to face. After that, the choice will be hers.

As the elevator descends toward the lobby, I make a silent promise, not to Savannah, but to myself. This time, I won't fail her. This time, I'll listen. This time, I'll fight for what matters, not what's easy.

The rain has stopped by the time I reach the street, though the sky remains gray and threatening. My driver is already waiting with the Bentley, having been alerted by IRIS the moment I decided to leave.

"The private airfield," I tell him as I slide into the back-seat. "Fast as you can."

He nods once, pulling smoothly into traffic as I check my phone again. Still no response from Savannah beyond that single word: Don't.

"I don't care what it takes," I murmur to myself as the city blurs past. "I'll find her. And this time, I'll get it right."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bash

I don't remember the last time I slept. Three days ago? Four? The days have blurred together since I landed in Langford, Virginia, this postcard-perfect town that feels like it exists in some alternate universe where people still leave their doors unlocked and know their neighbors' birthdays.

This morning marks my fifth consecutive daily pilgrimage to Bishop Blooms. For five days I've shown up at precisely 8:05 a.m., when Betty Bishop flips the hand-painted CLOSED sign to OPEN and releases the scent of fresh flowers into the quiet street.

And for five days, Savannah has refused to see me.

I rub my burning eyes as I park the rental car across from the shop. The morning sun casts long shadows down Langford's main street, painting the storefronts in honey-gold light. Bishop Blooms sits nestled between a hardware store and a bakery, its mint-green awning fluttering in the gentle breeze. Hand-lettered signs in the windows advertise weekly specials and custom arrangements.

It's exactly the kind of place that would make me break

out in hives even without the pollen. Small. Authentic. Painfully sincere.

I scan my reflection in the rearview mirror and wince. The man staring back looks like he's been through war. Dark circles shadow my eyes. My usually immaculate hair stands in disheveled peaks where I've run my hands through it too many times. The stubble on my jaw has officially crossed from "stylishly unshaven" to "possibly homeless."

You look pathetic, Alderidge.

I straighten my wrinkled shirt, the last clean one in my suitcase, and jam my tie into my pocket. Betty doesn't seem to care what I look like, but the ritual of attempting to look presentable feels important somehow.

The brass bell above the door chimes softly as I push it open, releasing a wave of fragrance that immediately makes my nose itch. Bishop Blooms smells like life itself—earthy, sweet, and overwhelming. I suppress a sneeze.

Betty looks up from behind the counter, silver-streaked auburn hair pulled into her usual messy bun. Her expression shifts from shopkeeper-friendly to something more complex when she recognizes me.

"Morning." Her tone is carefully neutral, but I catch the flicker of appraisal in her eyes. "Back again?"

"Morning, Mrs. Bishop." I clear my throat, fighting another sneeze. "If that's all right."

She studies me for a moment, taking in my rumpled appearance, the dark circles under my eyes, the barely concealed desperation that I'm sure is written all over my face. Then she nods toward the back room.

"Delivery forms need sorting. Stems need cutting. Same as yesterday."

It's not forgiveness. It's not even acceptance. But it's

something, an acknowledgment that I'm here, that I keep coming back. That maybe, just maybe, my presence means something.

"Thank you."

I make my way behind the counter, careful not to brush against the buckets of fresh blooms that line the wall. The back room is cool and dim, smelling of wet earth and green things. Wooden shelves hold rolls of ribbon, spools of wire, and stacks of colored tissue paper. A massive worktable dominates the center, scattered with clippers, glass vases, and yesterday's abandoned projects.

I pick up the clipboard of delivery slips and settle onto the metal stool I've claimed as mine over the past few days. The routine is familiar now: sort orders by delivery time, check inventory, and mark what needs reordering.

It's mindless work, but that's the point. I'm not here to impress anyone with my business acumen or financial genius. I'm here to show up. To stay. To prove that Sebastian Alderidge can be counted on, even when there's nothing in it for him.

Even when she won't see me.

The first day I arrived in Langford, I stormed into Bishop Blooms like I owned it, all righteous determination and practiced charm.

Betty took one look at me and said, "She doesn't want to see you." I tried arguing. Tried explaining. Tried every trick that's worked for me in boardrooms and bedrooms across Manhattan.

Betty simply crossed her arms and said, "You can leave, or you can make yourself useful."

So I stayed. Moved boxes. Swept floors. Organized receipts. All while sneezing my way through an allergy

attack that had me looking like I'd just gone ten rounds with a boxer.

Savannah never appeared.

The second day, I brought coffee and apologies. The third, flowers from a competitor across town (*a tactical error, judging by Betty's raised eyebrow*). The fourth day, I simply showed up and asked what needed doing.

And now here I am, on day five, sorting delivery slips and wondering if I've lost my mind.

Maybe this is what rock bottom feels like. A billionaire heir sorting flower orders in a small-town shop, waiting for a woman who won't even look at him.

I hear the soft scuff of footsteps and look up, expecting Betty with another task. My heart stops.

Savannah stands in the doorway, watching me.

She's different here. Softer somehow, in faded jeans and a loose sweater that slips off one shoulder. Her dark hair falls in waves around her face, free from the sleek bun she wore at the office. But those hazel-green eyes that haunted my dreams are guarded. Distant.

I want to stand. Want to cross the room and pull her into my arms. Want to say all the things I've rehearsed on sleepless nights in my hotel room.

Instead, I stay perfectly still, afraid any movement might shatter this moment.

"Morning," I manage, the word coming out rougher than intended.

She doesn't respond, only watching me with that unreadable expression, her arms crossed protectively over her chest.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with everything unsaid. I drop my gaze back to the clipboard, giving

her the space to leave if that's what she wants. The ball is in her court now. It has to be.

The clock on the wall ticks softly. One minute. Two. She doesn't leave.

"Why are you still here?" Her voice, when it finally comes, is low and strained. Not angry, like I expected. Just... tired.

I look up, meeting her eyes. "Because you deserve the truth."

"I tried to tell you the truth." A hint of bitterness edges into her tone. "You didn't want to hear it."

"I know." The admission burns my throat. "I was wrong."

She shakes her head slightly, disbelief flickering across her features.

"Five days, Sebastian. You've been coming here for four days."

"Five, if you count today."

"Don't you have an empire to run? A club to launch?"

I set the clipboard aside. "The club can wait."

"That's not the Sebastian Alderidge I know."

"Maybe you never knew me." The words slip out before I can stop them, raw with honesty. "Maybe I never knew myself."

She uncrosses her arms, her posture softening almost imperceptibly.

"Why are you really here?"

"I told you. The truth."

"You could have sent an email. Left a voicemail. Had your lawyers draft a formal apology."

"Would you have believed any of that?"

She doesn't answer, which is answer enough.

I stand slowly, careful to keep the table between us.

“I’m here because words aren’t enough, Savannah. I’m here because I need you to know that I understand what I did. That I know the truth—about Wolfe, about your mother’s shop, about everything.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “How—”

“Drake showed me the evidence. I know it was you. All of it.”

She stiffens, a flash of betrayal crossing her face.

“He didn’t do it for me. He did it for you.” I take a careful step forward. “To protect you. The way you tried to protect me.”

Savannah turns away, her profile sharp against the dim light filtering through the dusty window. “I didn’t need protection.”

“Neither did I. But you gave it anyway.” Another step. “Why?”

She remains silent, her gaze fixed on something outside the window.

“Why protect the Imperial Club?” I press. “Why protect me, after what I did to you?”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters to me.”

She turns back, eyes flashing.

“Why? So you can feel better about yourself? So you can go back to Manhattan with a clean conscience?”

“No.” I move around the table, closing the distance between us. “So I can understand what I threw away.”

Her breath catches, the sound loud in the quiet room.

“I’m not here for forgiveness, Savannah. I’m not here to win you back or convince you to return to New York.”

I stop a few feet from her, close enough to see the faint freckles across her nose, yet careful not to crowd her.

"I'm here because showing up is the only way I know how to prove that I mean it."

"Mean what?" Her voice is barely above a whisper.

"That I love you."

The words hang between us, simple and devastating. I've never said them to her before, not when we were tangled in my sheets, not when she stood in my office looking like everything I'd ever wanted or even when I should have fought for her instead of casting her out.

Her eyes search mine, looking for the lie, the manipulation, the angle. But there's nothing to find except the raw, bleeding truth I've finally stopped running from.

"You don't even know me," she says finally.

"I know enough." I hold her gaze steadily.

"I know you gave up dancing to support your mother. I know you took a job you hated to save this shop. I know you stood up to Wolfe, even when it cost you everything."

She shakes her head. "That's not who I am. That's what I did."

"Then let me know who you are." I take another step closer. "Let me learn you, Savannah. Not the assistant. Not the spy. You."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. "You didn't even let me explain."

The accusation stings as if she'd slapped me again.

"I know." My voice cracks. "And there's no excuse for that. I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"That if I listened, if I let myself hear what you had to say, I might have to face the truth."

"Which was?"

"That I'd fallen in love with you." The admission feels like

ripping open a wound. “That I was terrified of losing you. And when Xander showed me those emails... it was easier to believe you’d betrayed me than to consider I might lose you anyway.”

A single tear slides down her cheek. She brushes it away quickly.

“So you made sure you lost me on your terms.”

I flinch. “Yes.”

Silence falls between us again, heavier this time. I’ve laid myself bare, offered her the ugly truth without excuses or charm to soften it. Now all I can do is wait.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bash

The back door scrapes open, breaking the tension. Betty appears, her arms full of fresh-cut stems. She takes one look at us and stops.

“I’ll come back,” she says, already backing away.

“No,” Savannah says quickly. “It’s fine, Mama. I was just leaving.”

My heart sinks. After everything, she’s still walking away.

“Savannah—” I start, but she cuts me off with a shake of her head.

“I can’t do this right now.” She turns toward the door, then pauses. “Why do you keep coming back? Really?”

The question catches me off guard. I expected accusations, anger, even cold dismissal. Not curiosity.

“Because this is where you are,” I answer simply. “And I’d rather be here, sorting delivery slips and sneezing my head off, than anywhere else without you.”

Something shifts in her expression, a softening around the eyes, a slight parting of lips. “That’s not a good enough reason.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

She studies me for a long moment, as if seeing me for the first time. Then she nods once and slips past Betty into the main shop.

Betty watches her go, then turns back to me with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, that’s progress.”

“Is it?” I run a hand through my hair, frustration buzzing under my skin. “She still walked away.”

“But she talked to you.” Betty sets the stems down on the worktable. “Five days ago, she wouldn’t even come downstairs when you were here.”

I absorb this information, a flicker of hope warming my chest.

“So what happens now?”

Betty pulls on a pair of gardening gloves.

“Now you help me with these irises. They need to be stripped and cut for Mrs. Henderson’s anniversary arrangement.”

“I meant with Savannah.”

“I know what you meant.” She hands me a pair of clippers. “But that’s up to her, isn’t it?”

I take the clippers reluctantly. “And until then?”

“Until then, you show up.” Betty’s eyes, so like her daughter’s, hold mine steadily. “Every day. Rain or shine. Not because it’ll work, but because it’s the right thing to do.”

“And if it doesn’t work? If she never forgives me?”

Betty shrugs, the gesture eerily reminiscent of Savannah.

“Then at least you’ll know you tried. That you didn’t give up when it got hard.”

She turns back to the flowers, effectively ending the

conversation. I stand there for a moment, clippers in hand, feeling strangely adrift.

Is this what redemption looks like? Not grand gestures or passionate declarations, but the quiet persistence of showing up day after day? Not to win her back, but to prove I'm capable of staying?

I've never been good at staying. The yacht club expelled me for stealing boats. Columbia kicked me out for running a blackjack ring in the dorms. Even my own family expected me to fail, to run when things got tough.

Maybe that's why I'm still here. To prove them wrong. To prove myself wrong.

I move to the workbench and pick up an iris, its delicate purple petals unfurling like a secret. The stem is thick and sturdy in my hand.

"Cut just above the node," Betty instructs, demonstrating on another stem. "And strip the leaves from the bottom third."

I follow her example, focusing on the simple task. My first cut is too high, my second too jagged. Betty corrects me patiently, showing me how to hold the stem, how to angle the clippers.

We work in companionable silence, the pile of prepared stems growing between us. My mind wanders back to Savannah, to the tears she tried to hide, to the accusation in her eyes.

You didn't even let me explain.

The truth of it sits like a stone in my stomach. I didn't just fail to trust her, I refused to listen. Refused to give her the chance I'm begging for now.

The hypocrisy isn't lost on me.

The bell at the front of the shop chimes, signaling a customer. Betty sighs and sets down her clippers.

“Keep practicing. I’ll be back.”

She disappears through the door, leaving me alone with the flowers and my thoughts. I pick up another iris, careful to position the clippers exactly as she showed me.

The stem snaps cleanly, a perfect cut.

“You’re getting better at that.”

I nearly drop the clippers. Savannah stands in the doorway again, a small box in her hands.

“Your mother’s a good teacher.” I set the cut stem carefully on the pile. “Though I’m still not sure why irises need special treatment.”

“They don’t.” A ghost of a smile touches her lips. “Mama’s just particular.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak further. She hasn’t left yet. That feels significant.

Savannah steps into the room, setting the box on the edge of the worktable. “I brought you something.”

I stare at the box, then back at her. “Why?”

“Because you look terrible.” She pushes the box toward me. “And I’m tired of watching you sneeze.”

I open the box cautiously. Inside is a small bottle of allergy medication, a travel pack of tissues, and a hand sanitizer labeled “Lavender Fields.”

“The sanitizer helps mask the flower smell,” she explains when I pick it up. “For when the meds aren’t enough.”

I stare at the simple offerings, my chest constricting with emotions instead of allergies.

“Thank you.”

She nods, turning to leave.

“Savannah.” Her name leaves my lips like a prayer. “I’m sorry.”

She pauses, her back to me. “I know.”

“Not just for not listening. For all of it. For putting you in that position in the first place.”

She turns slowly, her expression guarded. “What position?”

“Between Wolfe and your mother.” I set the bottle down carefully. “Between your loyalties and your heart.”

She studies me, arms crossed again. “You didn’t put me there. Wolfe did.”

“But I made it worse.” I step around the table, closing the distance between us. “I should have seen something was wrong. Should have asked why you were pulling away.”

“Would you have believed me if I told you?”

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. I want to say yes, to claim I would have trusted her implicitly. But we both know that would be a lie.

“I don’t know,” I admit finally. “But I should have given you the chance.”

She nods, accepting the truth of it. “Yes, you should have.”

We stand there, inches apart yet separated by so much more than physical space. The silence stretches, not uncomfortable but weighted with possibility.

“Will you be back tomorrow?” she asks finally.

The question catches me off guard. “Do you want me to be?”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I hold her gaze steadily.

“Yes. I’ll be here tomorrow. And the day after that. And however many days it takes.”

“For what?”

“For you to believe me when I say I’m sorry. For you to trust me again—if you ever did.”

She looks away, her profile silhouetted against the window.

“I did trust you.”

The admission hits harder than any accusation. Past tense. *Did* trust.

“I know. And I broke that.” I fight the urge to reach for her. “I can’t undo what happened, Savannah. All I can do is show you who I am now. Who I want to be.”

She turns back to me, something shifting in her expression. “And who is that?”

“Someone worthy of a second chance.” I hold her gaze. “Someone who shows up. Who stays.”

She studies me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine. Looking for what, I’m not sure. The truth, maybe. Or a reason to believe.

“I need to get back to work,” she says finally. But she doesn’t move.

“So do I.” I gesture to the pile of stems. “Your mother will fire me if I don’t finish these irises.”

A flicker of a smile touches her lips again, gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

“She doesn’t actually employ you, you know.”

“Details.” I risk a small smile of my own. “I’ve been unemployed before.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“You’d be surprised.”

She uncrosses her arms, her posture softening.

“I’m still angry with you.”

“You should be.”

“And I don’t forgive you. Not yet.”

I nod, accepting this. “I know.”

“But...” She hesitates, as if weighing her next words carefully. “I’m glad you came back.”

The simple admission hits me, stealing my breath. It's not forgiveness. It's not even acceptance. But it's something—a crack in the wall, a glimpse of light.

“So am I,” I say softly.

She nods once, then turns to leave. This time, when she reaches the door, she pauses, glancing back over her shoulder.

“Take the medication. You look like hell.”

And then she's gone, leaving me standing amid scattered stems and unspoken promises. I pick up the bottle of allergy pills, turning it in my hand.

A peace offering? A white flag? Or just practical compassion?

I'm not sure it matters. What matters is that for the first time in five days, she looked at me. Spoke to me. Didn't slam the door in my face.

It's not forgiveness. But it might be a beginning.

I swallow two pills dry, the bitter taste lingering on my tongue. Then I pick up the clippers and get back to work. Iris after iris, stem after stem. A meditation of sorts, a physical manifestation of the patience I'm learning.

Because tomorrow I'll be back. And the day after that. For as long as it takes.

Because for the first time in my life, I've found something worth staying for.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Savannah

I'm already in the shop when he arrives.

The predawn darkness still clings to Bishop Blooms like a thin veil, shadows pooling in corners where light hasn't reached. The scent of fresh-cut flowers hangs heavy in the air—sweet gardenia, earthy fern, roses with their complex perfume that shifts and changes as you breathe it in.

I've been here since 5:30, unable to sleep, moving through the dim shop by muscle memory more than sight. Arranging stems. Checking orders. Filling buckets with fresh water that splashes coldly over my wrists. I didn't bother turning on all the lights. The soft glow from the back room spills enough illumination to work by, and there's something comforting about this half-darkness, this liminal space between night and day.

The coffee maker gurgles softly on the counter, the ancient one Mama refuses to replace because "it still works fine." Two mugs sit ready beside it. I wasn't sure I'd use the second one. Wasn't sure he'd come back today after our conversation yesterday.

But he does.

The knock is gentle, almost hesitant. Three soft taps against the glass door that fronts Bishop Blooms.

I freeze, hands still buried in a bucket of snapdragons, water dripping between my fingers. Through the window, I can see Sebastian's tall silhouette, unmistakable even in shadow. He's early. Earlier than he's been all week.

No flowers this time. No coffee from that pretentious Manhattan roaster. Just him, standing in the pale wash of streetlight, waiting.

I dry my hands on a towel, leaving damp streaks across the worn fabric. My heart beats a strange rhythm against my ribs, not the panicked flutter of yesterday, but something steadier, more resolute.

I've been thinking about what to say to him all night. Practiced conversations, explanations, careful words. None of them feel right now.

The lock clicks softly as I turn it, the door swinging open with a familiar creak. Cool morning air rushes in, carrying the scent of his cologne, subtle, expensive, and aching familiar.

"You're early," I say, stepping back to let him in.

"Couldn't sleep." His voice is rough at the edges, as if he's been up as long as I have.

He looks better than he did yesterday. The dark circles under his eyes are less pronounced, and his hair is damp from a recent shower. The stubble remains, softer now, less desperate. The wrinkled shirts have been replaced with a fresh button-down, sleeves already rolled to his elbows. He's lost the tie altogether.

I let the door fall closed behind him but don't lock it. That feels important somehow—leaving an exit, a way out for either of us.

“Coffee?” I nod toward the back room, where the pot has finally stopped its noisy percolation.

“Please.”

I lead him through the darkened shop, past arrangements in various stages of completion. Roses for the Hendricks wedding. Sunflowers for Mrs. Abernathy’s birthday. White lilies for the funeral home delivery at noon. Life and death and celebration, all measured in petals and stems.

The back room is warmer than the shop, heat radiating from the small space heater in the corner. Two mismatched chairs sit at the wooden worktable, their surfaces worn smooth by years of use. Between them, a scatter of ribbon scraps and stray petals catches the light.

I pour coffee into both mugs, the rich aroma filling the small space. Sebastian takes his without a word, his fingers brushing mine in the handoff. The touch is brief, electric, and gone before I can react.

We sit across from each other, steam curling between us like question marks. Outside, the world is still dark, still quiet. Bishop Blooms won’t open for another hour. We exist in a bubble of suspended time, just the two of us and all the words we haven’t said.

“I didn’t think you’d come in this early,” I say finally.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be here.”

I wrap my hands around my mug, letting the warmth seep into my palms.

“I’ve always been the one who opens.”

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly.

“Even when you were in New York?”

“Mama managed.” I take a sip, the coffee bitter and familiar. “But I’ve been doing mornings since I got back.”

He nods, his eyes never leaving my face. They’re clearer

today, more focused. Less haunted. As if he's finally slept, or finally made peace with not sleeping.

The silence between us stretches, not uncomfortable but weighty with everything still unsaid. Through the window, I can see the sky beginning to lighten, darkness fading to a deep blue that promises dawn.

Sebastian shifts in his chair, the wood creaking softly beneath him.

"Savannah—"

"My mother has MS."

The words fall between us, sudden and sharp. I hadn't planned to start there, but now that I've begun, I can't stop.

"Early onset. Diagnosed when I was nineteen." I keep my eyes on my coffee, watching ripples form as my hand trembles slightly. "It's managed with medication, but the meds are expensive. The insurance barely covers half."

Sebastian says nothing, but I can feel his gaze on me, steady and unwavering.

"That's why I left dance." I look up, meeting his eyes. "Not because I wasn't good enough or because I couldn't hack it. Because she needed me, and the choice was... no choice at all."

"Savannah—"

I shake my head. "Let me finish. Please."

He nods, settling back in his chair, his hands curling around his mug.

"The flower shop has been her whole life. Started it when I was three, built it from nothing." I take a breath, steadying myself. "When the chain florist opened across town two years ago, things got tight. Then the landlord raised the rent. Then her insurance changed, and suddenly the copay for her medication was five times what it had been."

I set my mug down, the ceramic making a soft thud against the wooden table. My hands feel steadier now, my voice stronger.

“I tried everything. Extra jobs. Loan applications. Even reached out to some of my old dance contacts, thinking maybe... but that door was already closed.”

Sebastian’s jaw tightens, a muscle flickering beneath the skin. Not anger—something else. Pain, maybe. Or understanding.

“The GoFundMe was a last resort. I hated it. Mama hated it more.” I smile faintly at the memory of her stubborn pride. “But we were three months from losing the shop, and her prescription was due, and I was just... out of options.”

The room has grown lighter as I speak, dawn seeping in through the windows, painting everything in soft gold. Sebastian’s face is clearer now, every expression visible. He doesn’t try to hide the impact of my words and doesn’t shield me from his reaction.

“Then the donation came. Twenty-five thousand dollars. Anonymous.” I laugh, the sound hollow. “I thought it was a mistake at first. Then a miracle.”

“Until Wolfe contacted you.” His voice is low, careful.

“Two days later. He knew everything. My name. Mama’s condition. How desperate we were.” My throat tightens. “He said he could make sure we never had to worry about money again. All I had to do was... what he asked.”

“Work for me.” The words are flat, not a question.

“Watch you. Report back. Nothing that would hurt you, he said. Just information.” I meet his gaze steadily. “I believed him at first. Or wanted to.”

“What changed?”

“Everything.” I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly

cold despite the heater's warmth. "You. The club. The way you talked about it—not like another acquisition, but something that mattered. And then..."

I trail off, the memories too sharp, too recent.

"And then we happened," he finishes for me.

"Yes."

The silence returns, filled now with shared understanding. Sebastian doesn't look away, doesn't flinch from the truth of what I'm saying. His hands remain steady around his mug, but I notice the whiteness of his knuckles, the tension he's containing.

"I tried to pull away." My voice is quieter now. "After that first night together. I thought if I could just... keep my distance. Do the minimum for Wolfe while not getting any closer to you. But you made that impossible."

A faint smile touches his lips. "I've been told I'm persistent."

"Stubborn."

"That too."

The lightness fades quickly, reality reasserting itself between us.

"When did you stop working for him?" Sebastian asks.

"I never really started." I look down at my hands, the nails short and practical, stained faintly green from the stems I've been handling. "I sent him basic information at first. Public stuff, things anyone could find. Then vaguer reports. Then nothing."

"And he threatened your mother."

"The shop. The medication. Everything." I meet his eyes again. "But by then, it wasn't just about Mama anymore. It was about the club. About you."

His expression shifts, something flickering behind his eyes.

“Why?”

“Because I believed in what you were building.” The truth spills out, unplanned and unstoppable. “Because I saw how much it meant to you. Because somewhere along the way, I stopped seeing the billionaire playboy and started seeing the man who stayed up until 3 a.m. redesigning a chandelier because the proportions weren’t quite right.”

Sebastian’s breath catches audibly. He sets his mug down, leaning forward.

“Why didn’t you tell me? About any of it.”

It’s the question I’ve been dreading, the one with no good answer. I close my eyes briefly, gathering courage.

“Because I was ashamed.” The admission burns my throat. “Because I made a choice I knew was wrong, even if the reasons were right. Because I was afraid...”

“Of what?”

“That you’d look at me exactly the way you did in that boardroom.” My voice cracks slightly. “Like I was nothing. No one. Just another person who betrayed you.”

The pain flashes across his face, raw and unfiltered. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

“No.” He reaches across the table, not quite touching me, his hand resting palm-up between us. An invitation. “I need you to really hear this. What I did—shutting you down, refusing to listen—there’s no excuse for that. None.”

“You were hurt.”

“So were you.” His eyes hold mine, intense and unwavering. “You were backed into an impossible corner, trying to protect your mother, yourself, even me. And instead of seeing that, I made it about my wounded pride.”

I stare at his outstretched hand, the long fingers, the faint calluses I’d discovered that night in his penthouse.

Empire of Desire

Hands that had held me, touched me, made me feel things I'd never felt before.

"I don't need you to forgive me," he continues, his voice lower. "I just need you to know that I understand now. All of it."

Slowly, deliberately, I place my hand in his. His fingers close around mine, warm and solid. Not demanding. Not desperate. Just... present.

"You weren't weak, Savannah," he says softly. "You were human."

Chapter Thirty

Savannah

The words wash over me like a benediction, releasing something tight and painful that's been lodged in my chest for weeks. I don't cry; those tears have been spent in the dark hours of too many sleepless nights. Instead, I feel a stillness settle over me, a quiet certainty.

"Thank you," I whisper.

His thumb traces gentle patterns against my palm. "For what?"

"For listening. For understanding."

"I should have done it sooner."

"Yes," I agree, a faint smile touching my lips. "You should have."

He laughs, the sound soft and genuine. "At least you're honest."

"Always."

His expression sobers. "I need to ask you something."

I tense slightly. "What?"

"There's a final meeting tomorrow. About the Imperial Club." His grip on my hand tightens fractionally. "Wolfe's

still out there. Still a threat. The project is moving forward, but there are... complications.”

“What kind of complications?”

“The kind that come with a very public scandal and an ongoing investigation.” His expression is grim. “Xander and the board want to discuss next steps. How to proceed. Who takes point on what.”

I nod slowly, understanding dawning. “And you want me there.”

“Yes.” He pauses, his gaze intent. “But not as my assistant. Not as damage control. Not even as someone fighting for me.”

“Then what?”

Sebastian leans forward, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

“I want you there fighting with me.”

The distinction hits me like a physical force. Not for him—*with* him. Side by side. Equals.

“The club was never just mine,” he continues. “From the moment you walked into that boardroom, it became ours. Your expertise, your eye, your passion—it’s in every detail. Every decision.”

My heart beats a strange rhythm against my ribs. “Sebastian—”

“I’m not asking you to come back to your old job.” His eyes never leave mine. “I’m asking you to claim what’s already yours. To stand with me and finish what we started.”

The weight of his words settles over me. This isn’t just about the club. It’s about trust, and partnership, and building something together instead of separately.

“What about Wolfe?” I ask quietly.

“We handle him together. No secrets. No lone stands.”

He squeezes my hand gently. “I won’t let him hurt you or your mother. I promise you that.”

I believe him. Against all logic, against the memory of betrayal and pain, I believe him.

“When is the meeting?”

“Tomorrow. Ten a.m.” His expression is carefully neutral, giving me space to decide. “You don’t have to answer now.”

But I do. My decision was made the moment he said “*with me*” instead of “for me.”

“Okay.”

Sebastian blinks, surprise flickering across his features.

“Okay?”

“I’ll be there.” I meet his gaze steadily. “With you.”

Something shifts in his expression—relief, yes, but something deeper too. A recognition, perhaps. A realization that this isn’t about fixing the past but building the future.

“Thank you,” he says simply.

Outside, the world has lightened to full dawn, sunlight streaming through the windows. In the main shop, I hear the familiar sounds of my mother’s arrival: the jingle of keys, the creak of the front door, the click of the lights switching on.

“Time to open,” I say, but I don’t pull my hand away.

Sebastian nods, his thumb still tracing gentle circles against my palm.

“I should let you get to work.”

Neither of us moves. The moment stretches between us, fragile and perfect. No desperate declarations. No heated touches. Just this, his hand in mine and the quiet understanding that something fundamental has changed.

The bell over the door chimes softly as Mama flips the

sign from CLOSED to OPEN. The sound breaks the spell, bringing reality rushing back.

I reluctantly withdraw my hand, already missing his warmth.

“I need to help Mama with the morning orders.”

“Of course.” Sebastian stands, pushing his chair back carefully. “What time do you finish today?”

“Around six,” I answer, surprised by the question. “Why?”

“I thought maybe we could have dinner.” His smile is hesitant, almost shy. “To talk about the meeting. Strategy.”

“Strategy,” I repeat, a smile tugging at my lips.

“Among other things.”

I consider him for a moment, this man who flew across the country, who sat in my mother’s shop for days sorting delivery slips, and who listened to my truth without interruption or judgment. This man who’s offering partnership instead of protection.

“Dinner would be nice,” I say finally.

Relief flashes across his face. “I’ll pick you up here. Six-fifteen.”

“I’ll be ready.”

He nods, turning to leave, then pauses at the doorway. “Savannah?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For telling me the truth. All of it.”

“Thank you for listening.”

Sebastian’s smile is soft, genuine in a way I’ve rarely seen. “I’m learning.”

Then he’s gone, moving through the shop with careful steps, nodding a greeting to my mother as he passes. I watch him through the window as he steps onto the sidewalk,

pausing briefly to look back at Bishop Blooms before continuing down the street.

I turn to the espresso machine, flipping switches and checking gauges with practiced movements. The familiar routine grounds me as my mind processes everything that just happened.

No grand declarations. No desperate promises. Just truth, finally spoken and heard. Just two people choosing to move forward together instead of apart.

Behind me, the shop comes fully to life as Mama turns on the radio, soft jazz filling the space. Morning sunlight streams through the windows, catching on water droplets and glass vases, scattering tiny rainbows across the walls.

On the table, a single rose petal lies forgotten, deep red against the worn wood. I pick it up, its velvet softness familiar against my fingertips. Without thinking, I slip it into my pocket, a small token of this morning, this conversation, this beginning.

Because that's what this is, I realize. Not an ending or a repair or a return to what was. But a beginning, fresh and fragile and full of possibility.

Mama appears in the doorway, eyebrows raised in silent question.

"He's picking me up for dinner," I say, answering what she hasn't asked. "At six."

She nods, a small smile touching her lips. "Good."

"I'm going back to New York tomorrow." The words come easily, without the guilt or fear I expected. "There's a meeting. About the club."

"About time." She hands me a stack of order forms. "You've been hiding long enough."

I take the papers, our fingers brushing in the handoff. "I wasn't hiding."

“Weren’t you?”

I consider her question, the rose petal a soft weight in my pocket.

“Maybe. But not anymore.”

Her smile widens, pride shining in her eyes. “That’s my girl.”

The bell over the door chimes again—our first customer of the day. Mama turns, professional smile already in place, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the lingering scent of Sebastian’s cologne.

I touch my pocket, feeling the outline of the rose petal through the fabric. Tomorrow, I’ll walk into that boardroom again. Not as Sebastian’s assistant or Wolfe’s reluctant spy, but as myself. The woman who stays, fights, and chooses to build instead of break.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, the future doesn’t terrify me. It beckons, bright with possibility, with Sebastian waiting at its threshold, hand outstretched.

And this time, when he asks me to join him, I won’t be running away.

I’ll be walking toward him.

Chapter Thirty-One

Bash

The wine bar glows like an ember in the gathering storm, its warmth spilling onto the rain-slicked sidewalk. Savannah's hand rests lightly in mine as we approach—not clinging, not hesitant, just... present.

I pull open the heavy oak door, feeling its weight against my palm. The scent hits me first: old wood, candle wax, and wine mingling in the air. Savannah steps through without looking back, her confidence a quiet statement. She doesn't need to check if I'm following. She knows I am.

When I reserved this place, a converted bank vault tucked beneath Richmond's historic district, I'd worried it might feel pretentious. Too deliberate. Too *Alderidge*. But watching Savannah take it in, her eyes catching on the original brass fixtures and velvet-lined booths, I see only appreciation.

"This place is beautiful," she says, voice soft enough that only I can hear it.

The hostess approaches, elegant and understated in black.

“Mr. Alderidge, your table is ready.”

I nod, my hand finding the small of Savannah’s back instinctively. She doesn’t flinch away. Another small victory.

We follow the hostess past the main dining area, where conversations hum like bees, intimate and distant all at once. Our booth is tucked into an alcove that was once a private counting room. A single candle flickers at its center, casting shadows that dance across the polished table.

Savannah slides in first, the deep burgundy velvet framing her like a portrait. She’s changed since this morning, now wearing a simple black dress that hugs her curves without flaunting them, hair loose around her shoulders instead of the tight bun she wore at the shop. She looks softer. Less guarded.

I settle across from her, suddenly aware of how narrow the table is. Our knees nearly touch beneath it.

“What?” Savannah asks, catching my stare.

“Nothing.” I shake my head, then reconsider. “Everything.”

Her lips curve slightly. “That’s specific.”

“I’m just...” The words catch. I’ve spent a career in boardrooms, commanding attention, making million-dollar pitches without breaking a sweat. Yet here, with this woman, simple truths feel monumental. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” She unfolds her napkin, flattening it across her lap with deliberate movements. “Though I have to admit, I was expecting somewhere more...”

“Ostentatious?”

“I was going to say ‘Manhattan,’ but that works too.” Her eyes crinkle at the corners, almost a smile.

“Richmond has its charms.”

“Clearly.” She glances around. “How did you find this place?”

“Lucas.” I lean back, settling into the booth. “He has an uncanny talent for finding the best spots in any city.”

“Lucas.” She nods, recognition flickering. “Your second-in-command. The one who looks perpetually amused by everyone’s existence.”

I laugh, the sound surprising me with its ease.

“That’s an unnervingly accurate description.”

The sommelier approaches, presenting a wine list bound in leather. I take it, scanning briefly before looking up at Savannah.

“Red or white?”

She considers for a moment. “Red. It feels like a red wine night.”

I nod, turning to the sommelier.

“We’ll have the Château Margaux, 2015.”

“Excellent choice, sir.” He withdraws, leaving us alone again.

Savannah’s eyebrow arches. “Showoff.”

“Guilty.” I don’t try to deny it. “But it’s a good wine.”

“I wouldn’t know. I can’t even pronounce it.”

“Shah-toe Mar-go,” I offer, keeping my tone light.

“See, now you’re just showing off more.” But she’s smiling, the tension in her shoulders easing visibly.

The waiter arrives to take our food order, and we both opt for the chef’s tasting menu. I’m not particularly hungry; my stomach is too knotted with the significance of tonight, but I want this to feel normal. Like we have all the time in the world.

When we’re alone again, I lean forward slightly.

“Drake told me what you did.”

She freezes. “What do you mean?”

“After you left. He said you had him search through every file, every email. That you tracked Wolfe’s movements for months.”

Heat rises to her face. “Drake talks too much.”

“He cares about you.”

“He barely knows me.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive.” I hold her gaze steadily. “Just like being your boss didn’t stop me from caring about you.”

She meets my eyes without flinching.

“And it didn’t stop me from trying to protect you, even when you hated me.”

Her candor catches me off guard. We’re skirting dangerously close to the very topics I wanted to avoid tonight: work, Wolfe, and the tangled mess we’re still unraveling. But her expression is open, curious rather than defensive.

“I didn’t want tonight to be about that,” I admit. “About fixing things or rehashing...”

“I know.” She reaches across the table, her fingers brushing my wrist. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

Her touch grounds me, warm against my pulse point. She doesn’t pull away.

“For what?” My voice comes out rougher than I intended.

“For believing me. Eventually.” The last word carries a hint of humor, softening the blow.

I turn my hand, catching her fingers in mine.

“I should have believed you from the start.”

“Yes,” she agrees simply. “You should have.”

No excuses. No platitudes. Just acknowledgment.

The sommelier returns, presenting the wine with practiced efficiency. I go through the motions of tasting and approving, hyper aware of Savannah watching me. When he finally leaves us with two filled glasses, I raise mine slightly.

“To new beginnings?” I suggest, then wince at how trite it sounds.

Savannah’s smile widens. “You can do better than that, Alderidge.”

She’s right. I lower my glass, reconsidering.

“To second chances, then. And to being worthy of them.”

Something flickers in her eyes, approval, maybe. Or recognition. She taps her glass gently against mine.

“I’ll drink to that.”

The wine is excellent, rich and complex on my tongue. I watch as Savannah takes her first sip, her eyes widening slightly in appreciation.

“Okay, I see why you were showing off,” she concedes. “That’s good.”

“Worth its unpronounceable name?”

“Definitely.”

Our first course arrives—tiny, perfect bites of something involving scallops and foam. I’m barely tasting it, too focused on the woman across from me.

“What music were they playing that night?” Savannah asks suddenly.

I blink. “What night?”

“The night we met. At the Regent Hotel bar.” She takes another sip of wine, her eyes never leaving mine. “I’ve been trying to remember, but it’s all a blur.”

The question catches me off guard. It’s so... normal. So

disconnected from the crisis we've been navigating. But I find myself searching my memory, grateful for the shift.

"Something ambient, I think. Not too noticeable over the conversations around us."

"That doesn't narrow it down much."

"I wasn't paying attention to the music," I admit. "I was more focused on why you looked so sad, staring into your bourbon."

Her eyebrows lift. "I did look sad, didn't I?"

"You said something about responsibility feeling like a noose." The memory comes into sharper focus. "About being tired of making everything okay when it clearly wasn't."

Savannah's expression softens. "I'd forgotten that part."

"I hadn't." The admission slips out before I can stop it.

"What else do you remember?" she asks, leaning forward slightly.

I consider the question. There are so many answers I could give—the way the city lights reflected in her eyes, how she said she wasn't waiting for anyone until I arrived, the electricity when our fingers brushed reaching for our drinks. But what rises to the surface is simpler.

"I remember thinking you were the first real thing I'd encountered in months."

Her fingers still around her wine glass. "What do you mean?"

"Everyone in my world performs. All the time." I search for the right words. "They're calculating advantages, measuring responses, navigating a thousand unspoken rules. But you... you just *were*. Sad. Beautiful. Unimpressed by wealth or status."

"I was plenty impressed," she counters softly.

"Not by any of that." I hold her gaze. "By something else entirely."

A faint blush touches her cheeks, visible even in the candlelight.

"You're giving me too much credit. I was drinking alone in a hotel bar, not conducting a character assessment."

"And yet."

Our second course arrives—something with truffle and delicate greens. The waiter explains it in detail, but I barely register his words.

When we're alone again, Savannah picks up her fork.

"What book have you pretended to read but never actually finished?"

I laugh, caught off guard by the shift. "*Infinite Jest*. You?"

"*War and Peace*." She grins. "I made it exactly 342 pages in before admitting defeat."

"That's impressively specific."

"I dog-eared the page so I could claim I was '*in the middle of it*' for years."

"Strategic."

"Always."

The conversation flows more easily after that, skipping from books to movies to childhood memories. I learn that she broke her arm at nine, trying to recreate a dance move from *Fame*.

She discovers my secret fondness for bad sci-fi movies. We talk about everything except what brought us here: the scandal, the betrayal, or the reconciliation still in progress.

By our fourth course, Savannah's laugh has shifted. It's fuller, freer, a sound I've rarely heard from her. The force of it opens something in my chest that's been sealed shut for too long.

“What?” she asks, noticing my expression.

“Your laugh. The real one.” I shake my head slightly. “It’s...”

“Loud? Obnoxious? My mother always said it could wake the dead.”

“Perfect,” I finish quietly. “It’s perfect.”

She stills, fork halfway to her mouth. For a moment, I worry I’ve overstepped, pushed too fast into territory we’re not ready for. But then she sets her fork down, her eyes never leaving mine.

“This isn’t how I expected tonight to go,” she admits.

“No?”

“I thought...” She hesitates. “I thought there would be more negotiation. More careful circling. Not...”

“This?”

“Yeah.” She gestures between us. “This feels...”

“Real?”

She nods. “Real.”

I take a breath, feeling the weight of the moment.

“I’m not building anything else unless you’re part of it.”

The words hang between us, heavier than I intended. Not a question, not quite a promise—just truth, raw and unfiltered.

Silence stretches, a beat too long. Thunder rolls outside, distant but gathering strength. Savannah leans forward, close enough that I can smell her perfume, something citrusy and light.

“That sounds like an empire worth choosing.”

Relief washes through me, so powerful I almost have to close my eyes against it. Instead, I reach for her hand across the table, and she meets me halfway.

“I’m not rushing this,” I say, needing her to understand. “Whatever this is becoming.”

“Good.” Her thumb traces small circles against my palm. “Because I’m not ready to be rushed.”

“What are you ready for?” The question is quiet, almost reverent.

She considers for a moment.

“Dinner. Conversation. Tomorrow’s meeting.” Her eyes meet mine, clear and steady. “You.”

Simple words. Profound ones.

“I can work with that,” I murmur.

Our dessert arrives, something chocolate and decadent that neither of us pays much attention to. The storm has intensified outside, rain lashing against the windows, but in our alcove, everything is soft. Warm. Safe, in a way I haven’t felt in longer than I can remember.

When the check comes, I handle it discreetly. Savannah doesn’t protest or insist on splitting it, another small indication of how things have shifted between us. This isn’t about power or independence. It’s just dinner.

“Ready?” I ask when everything is settled.

She nods, gathering her small purse. I slide out of the booth first, offering my hand. She takes it, and we navigate through the now-crowded restaurant toward the exit.

Outside, the rain has softened to a gentle mist. The street shines like polished obsidian under the streetlights, reflecting blurred constellations of city lights. My driver waits at the curb, engine idling.

“I can take you home,” I offer, though the thought of saying goodbye, even temporarily, creates a hollow feeling in my chest.

Savannah nods. “Thank you.”

We slide into the backseat, the door closing with a soft thud behind us. She gives the driver her mother’s address, then settles back, closer to me than necessity requires. Our

hands find each other in the darkness, fingers intertwining with quiet certainty.

The car moves smoothly through Richmond's rain-slicked streets. Neither of us speaks, but the silence isn't empty. It's full of everything we've said tonight, everything we didn't need to say.

When we reach Bishop Blooms, the driver pulls to a gentle stop. Light spills from the apartment windows above the shop, warm against the night's darkness. Savannah turns to me, her features soft in the dim glow of the dashboard.

"I'm not ready for everything," she says quietly.

I squeeze her hand gently. "You don't have to be. Just ready for me."

Her smile, slow and sure, is answer enough. "I am."

She leans in, and for a moment I think she might kiss me. Instead, she presses her lips to my cheek, lingering just long enough to make my heart stutter.

"Goodnight, Sebastian," she whispers, her breath warm against my skin.

"Goodnight, Savannah."

I watch her walk to the door, fishing keys from her purse. She turns once, lifting her hand in a small wave before disappearing inside.

The car remains idling at the curb. My driver glances back, waiting for direction.

"The hotel," I say finally.

As we pull away, I touch my cheek where her lips were moments ago. It's not a kiss of passion or desperation. It's something more valuable—a promise. A beginning.

Tomorrow, we'll face Wolfe, the board, and all the complications we've set aside for this one evening. Tomorrow, we'll return to the battlefield we've been navigating for weeks. But tonight, in the quiet sanctuary of a converted

Lily Rae

bank vault, we found something worth fighting for. Something real.

I lean back against the leather seat, watching Richmond slide past the window. For the first time in weeks, maybe longer, I feel like I can breathe.

One dinner. One evening of truth.

One yes that matters more than all the rest.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Bash

Morning light filters weakly through Manhattan's cloud cover, casting the Alderidge-Hathaway boardroom in shades of gray. I stand in the hallway, straightening the cuffs of my navy suit—an armor of sorts, tailored within an inch of perfection.

“Ready?”

Savannah's voice draws my attention. She stands beside me, a vision in black, wearing a structured blazer, fitted dress, and heels that put her almost at eye level with me. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek chignon, not a strand out of place. Professional. Polished. Untouchable.

But I see what others won't: the slight tremor in her fingers as she adjusts her watch. The way she swallows before meeting my gaze. The determined set of her jaw that says she's prepared for battle.

“I was born ready,” I respond, forcing lightness into my tone. “The question is, are you?”

She doesn't smile.

“I've been preparing for this moment since the day Wolfe first contacted me.”

I fight the urge to reach for her hand. We've agreed—no visible displays. Not here, not now. This isn't about us as a couple; it's about dismantling Wolfe's empire of lies and restoring what he tried to destroy.

"Remember," I say quietly, "you have nothing to prove to them."

Her chin lifts slightly. "I'm not here to prove anything. I'm here to end this."

Something in her tone—steel wrapped in silk—reminds me why I fell for her in the first place. Savannah Bishop doesn't break; she rebuilds.

I check my watch. "Showtime."

With a nod to my assistant hovering nearby, the boardroom doors swing open. The low murmur of voices inside falls silent as we enter.

I feel rather than see the reactions. The subtle stiffening of shoulders. The exchanged glances. The shift in energy as Savannah follows me in, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor.

Xander sits at the head of the table, impeccable as always in his charcoal suit. His expression reveals nothing, but his eyes track Savannah's movement like a hawk. Beside him, Eli leans back slightly in his chair, his posture more relaxed but his gaze equally sharp.

The legal team, three of our top attorneys, occupies one side of the table, notepads and tablets at the ready. Opposite them sits PR, led by Claire Wilson, who doesn't bother hiding her surprise at seeing Savannah.

At the far end, Drake Blackwood lounges with deliberate casualness, a sleek laptop open before him. The screens mounted on the walls flicker with data streams, IRIS working silently in the background.

"Sebastian." Xander's voice cuts through the silence,

cool and measured. "I wasn't aware we'd have... additional attendees."

I don't blink. "Ms. Bishop is essential to this presentation."

"Is she." Not a question, but a statement dripping with skepticism.

I ignore it, moving to the empty chairs at the opposite end of the table from Xander. Savannah follows, taking the seat to my right. I remain standing, placing the thick folder I've been carrying onto the glossy surface.

"Before we begin," I say, my voice carrying easily across the room, "I want to thank everyone for adjusting their schedules for this emergency session."

"Hard to refuse when you invoke emergency protocols," Claire from PR remarks, not quite under her breath.

I smile thinly. "You'll understand why in approximately three minutes." I slide the folder forward. "You'll want to start with page six."

No one moves immediately. Then Eli, ever the peacemaker, reaches for the folder and opens it. His eyebrows lift as he scans the contents. Without comment, he passes it to legal, who immediately begin flipping through pages with increasing interest.

"Mr. Blackwood," I say, nodding to Drake, "would you provide some context?"

Drake straightens, tapping a few keys on his laptop. The wall screens shift, displaying complex financial diagrams, email chains, and what appears to be a map of shell companies.

"James Wolfe's systematic campaign against the Alderidge family spans years," Drake begins, his tone matter-of-fact. "The Imperial Club was his third target, following the failed attempts to disrupt the Alderidge-

Hathaway merger and sabotage of the Artisan Hotel project.”

Legal continues examining the documents, expressions growing increasingly grave. I catch Savannah’s eye for the briefest moment, her presence solid beside me, grounding in its certainty.

“His methods evolved,” Drake continues, highlighting sections of data that pulse red on the screens. “From direct corporate espionage to more... personal tactics.”

I cut in, my voice deceptively calm.

“He used Savannah to get to me. It ends here.”

Savannah doesn’t flinch at being the subject of discussion. She sits straight-backed, eyes forward, the perfect picture of professional composure.

Bertha Davis, our lead counsel, looks up from the documents.

“This is...” She clears her throat. “This evidence is comprehensive. The financial trail alone would be enough for federal charges.”

“And the blackmail evidence is irrefutable,” adds Harrison, her colleague. “The timestamps match. The money transfers are documented. The threats are explicit.”

Claire from PR leans forward, eyes narrowed. “Containable—if we get ahead of it. We need to frame this properly before Wolfe can spin it.”

“That won’t be a problem,” I say.

Xander’s gaze hasn’t left my face. “Explain.”

I nod to Drake, who taps a few more keys. A news headline appears on screen, dated just thirty minutes ago:

“JAMES WOLFE INDICTED ON MULTIPLE COUNTS OF FRAUD, BLACKMAIL, AND CORPORATE ESPIONAGE.”

“The FBI raided his offices at 6 a.m.,” I state flatly. “The indictment was unsealed twenty minutes ago.”

Eli leans forward, fingers steepled. “And what happens to Wolfe?”

The corner of my mouth twitches.

“If convicted on all counts? Fifteen to twenty years, minimum. His assets are already frozen.”

A ripple of reaction moves through the room, subtle shifts in posture, exchanged glances. I’ve surprised them. Good.

“This is...” Claire starts, then stops, recalibrating. “This changes our approach entirely.”

“Not really,” I counter. “The truth remains the same. Only the timeline has accelerated.”

“And the Imperial Club?” Harrison asks.

“Opens as scheduled. Three days from now.”

Xander hasn’t moved, his gaze calculating as he processes the information before him. Finally, he speaks, his voice measured.

“And what about her?” His eyes flick to Savannah.

The room temperature seems to drop ten degrees. I feel Savannah’s tension beside me, though she doesn’t visibly react.

I keep my eyes locked on Xander.

“She saved this club. Quietly. Completely. That’s all you need to know.”

“That’s not good enough,” Xander counters. “This family—this company—nearly imploded because of her involvement.”

“No,” I say, my tone hardening. “It nearly imploded because Wolfe manipulated everyone in this room, myself included. Because we were too blind to see what was

happening. Because when the moment came to listen, we chose an accusation instead.”

Savannah’s breath catches slightly beside me. I don’t look at her, keeping my focus on my brother.

“She could have walked away,” I continue. “She should have. But instead, she compiled evidence against Wolfe at significant personal risk. She ensured it reached the proper authorities. She protected the Imperial Club, and by extension, this family, when none of us deserved her loyalty.”

Silence follows my words. Even Xander seems momentarily at a loss.

I straighten, buttoning my suit jacket in a deliberate movement.

“James Wolfe spent a decade trying to destroy this family. And the playboy you dismissed?” I allow myself the smallest smile. “He just destroyed him instead.”

Eli coughs lightly, a poor disguise for what might be amusement. Legal exchanges impressed glances. PR is already scribbling notes, clearly pivoting to a new narrative.

Only Xander remains unmoved, his expression unreadable as he studies me, then Savannah.

“The board will need to review all of this,” he says finally.

“Of course,” I agree smoothly. “You’ll find everything in order.”

I gather my notes, sensing the shift in the room’s energy. We’ve won, not just against Wolfe, but in this boardroom. The impact of what we’ve presented is settling over them like a changing tide.

As I prepare to stand, Savannah moves to gather her things as well. I notice how the others still avoid addressing her directly, as though uncertain of her status in this new reality.

Something inside me hardens. This isn't enough.

I turn, not to Xander or the board, but to her. The woman who weathered the storm when I cast her out. The woman who fought for me when I failed to fight for her.

"You should have never had to walk out of this room alone," I say, my voice low but clear enough to carry.

Surprise flickers across her face before she masters it. Understanding dawns in her eyes—what I'm doing, what it means.

I extend my hand to her. Not a romantic gesture, nothing so overt. A professional courtesy that is, in this context, revolutionary. A statement. A correction. A crown.

Her eyes hold mine for a beat, two. Then she places her hand in mine, rising with quiet dignity.

The room watches, silent, as I help her gather her things. No one speaks as we prepare to leave. They don't need to. The message is clear.

We walk toward the door, side by side. Not touching but unmistakably together.

"Sebastian," Xander calls, just as we reach the threshold.

I pause, turning slightly.

"The Imperial Club," he says. "I trust you have everything under control."

It's as close to an apology—and approval—as I'm likely to get from him.

I nod once. "Everything's exactly where it should be."

My eyes flick to Savannah, then back to my brother. The implication isn't subtle.

We exit the boardroom, the door closing behind us with a soft click that feels like punctuation. In the hallway, several assistants hover nervously, clearly aware that something significant has transpired.

Savannah exhales slowly beside me, the first sign of tension releasing from her shoulders.

“That went...” she begins.

“Perfectly,” I finish.

She glances at me, a hint of her usual sharpness returning.

“I was going to say ‘*surprisingly smoothly*,’ but your ego clearly doesn’t need the boost.”

I laugh, the sound echoing in the marble corridor.

“Months at Alderidge-Hathaway, and you still underestimate how much I love being right.”

Her lips curve into a smile—small, but genuine.

“I underestimated a lot of things about you.”

Something shifts in the air between us, the professional veneer slipping just enough to reveal the deeper currents beneath. I resist the urge to touch her face and pull her into my arms right here in the executive hallway.

Instead, I check my watch.

“We have approximately eight minutes before my phone starts exploding with calls from legal.”

“And PR,” Savannah adds. “Claire was already drafting press releases in her head.”

“Seven minutes, then,” I amend. “Just enough time for coffee before the real chaos begins.”

We walk toward the executive elevator, maintaining a professional distance that nonetheless feels intimate. The weight of what we’ve accomplished, what we’ve overcome, settles between us like a shared secret.

As the elevator doors slide open, Savannah glances up at me.

“What now?” she asks quietly.

I step inside, holding the door for her. The question

hangs between us, layered with meaning beyond the immediate aftermath of the meeting.

I allow myself to look at her—really look at her. The woman who stood her ground. The woman who chose to fight. The woman who, against all odds, chose me.

“Now?” I say, the smallest smile breaking across my face as the doors begin to close. “We finish what we started.”

Her eyes hold mine as the elevator begins its descent, carrying us toward whatever comes next—together.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Savannah

I straighten the crystal drop hanging slightly askew from the chandelier in the Imperial Club's entryway. My fingers linger against the cool faceted surface, feeling the slight weight shift as it returns to perfect alignment. Behind me, the muted sounds of staff making final preparations create a gentle symphony: the clink of glasses being arranged, the soft padding of shoes across marble floors, hushed voices confirming last-minute details.

No press yet. No cameras. No spotlight.

Just me, in this quiet moment before the storm.

I check my watch—6:37 p.m. The doors open at 8:00. Everything is on schedule, but my heart still races like we're running hours behind.

"The floral arrangements for table seven need to be centered," I tell a passing staff member, my voice calm despite the tornado of checklists spinning through my mind. "And please make sure the piano has been tuned one last time."

The young woman nods, hurrying off toward the ball-

room. I watch her go, then turn back to survey the entryway. Crystal ceiling fixtures cast prism-scattered light across cream marble floors. The reception desk, a masterpiece of black marble and brass inlay, gleams like it's been polished a thousand times.

Which it probably has, knowing Bash.

Bash.

Even thinking his name sends a flutter through my chest, not the anxious kind that once plagued me, but something warmer. Deeper.

I haven't seen him since early afternoon when he disappeared to handle some last-minute call with investors. He kissed me quickly, promised to return for the final inspections, and vanished in his typical whirlwind fashion.

That was five hours ago.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my dress, a sleek black column of fabric that hugs my curves without restricting movement. I've learned my lesson about impractical evening wear during events.

Everything good?

Tessa's text reads.

I type back quickly.

Perfect. Terrifying. Both.

Three dots appear immediately.

He's just as nervous as you are. Saw him changing his tie three times.

A smile tugs at my lips.

Bash Alderidge doesn't get nervous. Keep telling yourself that, sweetie.

I slide my phone away, my smile lingering. The head of catering approaches with questions about the champagne service, and I shift back into manager mode, directing and deciding with the efficiency that has become my trademark around here.

After he leaves, I find myself alone in the entryway again. The space feels different than it did just few months ago when I first walked these floors as Bash's assistant, my stomach knotted with secrets and fear.

Now every corner holds a piece of me. A decision I made. A suggestion that came to life. A battle I fought and won.

My heels click softly as I cross to the small alcove near the main entrance, a space that once seemed insignificant in the grand scheme of the club's design. Now it holds something precious.

The Bishop Blooms chandelier.

It wasn't called that on any official documentation, of course. On paper, it was the "Entryway Botanical Illumination Feature." But Bash and I knew what it really was.

I reach up, my fingers brushing against a silk petal. The entire fixture is a cascade of handcrafted flowers—each one a perfect replica of varieties my mother grows in her shop. Gardenias. Stargazer lilies. Virginia bluebells. Woven between them are delicate crystal teardrops that catch and refract light, making the whole creation appear to be dripping with morning dew.

When I first suggested incorporating more botanical elements into the design, I never imagined Bash would commission something so personal. So perfect.

“It nearly killed the lighting designer,” he told me when he revealed the finished piece. “But I told him if he couldn’t make flowers glow, I’d find someone who could.”

My throat tightens at the memory. I swallow hard, refusing to smudge my makeup before the night even begins.

I check my watch again—7:15. The press will arrive soon for their preview tour, followed by the first wave of VIP guests at 8:00.

Time to inspect the ballroom one last time.

The massive double doors, twelve feet of oak and brass, open silently at my touch. I pause at the threshold, taking in the space that has consumed my life for months.

The Imperial Club’s grand ballroom rises before me in a breathtaking display of restrained opulence. Soaring ceilings with intricate crown molding. Walls paneled in warm walnut. Floor-to-ceiling windows draped in midnight blue velvet, their brass hardware gleaming in the soft light.

Round tables dressed in crisp white linens dot the perimeter, each one adorned with low centerpieces that allow for conversation. The dance floor, Italian marble in a subtle herringbone pattern, gleams like a frozen lake beneath the constellation of chandeliers overhead.

In the far corner, a small orchestra sets up on the elevated platform we fought so hard to preserve despite structural challenges. The piano, a gleaming black Steinway, waits silently at center stage.

Everything is perfect. Everything is ready.

So why does it feel like I’m still holding my breath?

I cross to the nearest table, adjusting a fork that’s barely a millimeter out of alignment. The silverware is heavy in my hand, real silver, not plated. Nothing but the best for the Imperial.

“If you move that fork one more time, it might file a harassment complaint.”

Bash’s voice comes from behind me, warm with amusement. I turn to find him leaning against a column, watching me with that half-smile that still makes my heart skip.

He’s devastating in his tuxedo—the jacket perfectly tailored to his broad shoulders, the crisp white shirt a stark contrast against his tanned skin. His dark hair is styled just enough to look intentional without seeming fussy.

“I thought you’d still be on that call,” I say, setting down the fork.

“Ended thirty minutes ago.” He straightens, crossing toward me. “I’ve been watching you terrorize the staff for the last ten minutes.”

“I haven’t been terrorizing anyone.” I smooth my hands down my dress. “I’ve been making final adjustments.”

“Mmm.” He stops before me, close enough that I can smell his cologne—cedar and bergamot with something darker underneath. His eyes travel over me slowly, appreciation evident in their depths.

“You look stunning.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” I reach up, straightening his bow tie though it doesn’t need it. My fingers linger against the starched fabric of his collar. “Did you really change your tie three times?”

He narrows his eyes. “Tessa needs to learn the meaning of confidentiality.”

“She’s loyal to me, not you.” I can’t help but smile. “Besides, I like knowing the great Sebastian Alderidge gets nervous too.”

“I wasn’t nervous about the tie.” His hand captures mine, holding it against his chest. “I was nervous about this.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small velvet box. My heart stutters, then races.

“Bash—”

“Relax,” he says with a soft laugh. “It’s not that kind of box. Not yet, anyway.”

A strange mix of relief and disappointment washes through me.

“Then what is it?”

He opens the box, revealing a delicate gold bracelet. Suspended from the chain is a single charm: a miniature chandelier with tiny flowers woven through it.

“I had it made,” he says quietly. “A reminder of what we built here. Together.”

My throat tightens again, but this time I don’t fight it. “It’s beautiful.”

“May I?”

I nod, extending my wrist. His fingers are warm against my skin as he fastens the bracelet. The tiny chandelier catches the light, sending prisms dancing across my arm.

“Perfect,” he murmurs, but he’s looking at me, not the bracelet.

The sound of voices in the hallway breaks the moment, staff directing the first photographers for their preview tour.

“We should probably...” I gesture vaguely toward the doors.

“Probably,” Bash agrees, but he doesn’t move. Instead, he glances toward the orchestra setting up in the corner. “Actually, I have a better idea.”

He extends his hand, palm up. “Dance with me.”

I blink. “Now? The press will be here any minute.”

“Let them wait.” His eyes hold mine, steady and certain. “Dance with me. In the place we built.”

Something in his voice, in the quiet intensity of his gaze,

makes my chest ache. This isn't a performance for cameras or critics. This is just for us.

I place my hand in his. "There's no music."

He turns toward the orchestra, giving a slight nod. The musicians exchange glances, then the pianist begins to play soft, slow jazz that feels both timeless and intimate.

Bash leads me to the center of the empty dance floor. His hand settles at my waist, holding me with confidence but not possession. I rest my other hand on his shoulder, feeling the solid warmth of him through the fine wool of his tuxedo.

We begin to move, finding our rhythm together. The marble is cool and smooth beneath my heels as we glide across the floor.

"You know," he says quietly, "the first time I brought you here, this place was a disaster."

"Exposed wiring and scaffolding everywhere," I remember. "I thought you were crazy."

"And now?"

"Now I think you're a visionary." I let him spin me slowly, the skirt of my dress wrapping around my legs before releasing. "But still a little crazy."

His laugh is low, vibrating through his chest against mine.

"That's fair."

We dance in comfortable silence for a moment, the piano notes wrapping around us like a cocoon. Through the windows, the Manhattan skyline glitters in the evening darkness, a backdrop of diamonds against velvet.

"Do you remember what you said to me that day?" Bash asks, his voice soft near my ear.

I try to recall. "Something about permit regulations?"

"After that."

I shake my head.

“You said, ‘This place could be magnificent.’” His hand tightens slightly at my waist. “Not *will be* or *should be*. Could be. Like you already saw what it could become.”

“I did,” I admit. “Even with all the chaos and uncertainty, I could see what you were trying to build.”

“What *we* built,” he corrects gently. “This place has your fingerprints all over it, Savannah. Your vision. Your heart.”

The earnestness in his voice makes something crack open inside me. For so long, I’ve defined myself by what I could offer others, support for my mother, obedience to Wolfe, even assistance to Bash. Always in service, never in ownership.

But here, now, I can’t deny the truth in his words. This place—this magnificent, impossible place—bears my mark as surely as it bears his.

“Are you proud?” he asks, studying my face.

The question catches me off guard. Am I proud? The feeling in my chest is so big, so unfamiliar, I’m not sure what to call it.

“I’m...” I search for words. “I’m not used to taking credit.”

“That wasn’t my question.” His eyes hold mine, seeing more than I want to reveal. “Are you proud, Savannah?”

The music swells around us, the pianist adding depth and complexity to the melody. Outside, I can hear the distant murmur of voices growing closer—the press arriving for their preview.

In moments, this private sanctuary will fill with people. Cameras will flash. Critics will judge. But right now, it’s just us and the truth hanging between us.

“Yes,” I whisper, the admission feeling like release. “Yes, I’m proud.”

Something in Bash’s expression softens, like he’s been waiting for exactly those words. He doesn’t respond verbally. Instead, he draws me closer, my head finding its natural place against his chest. His heartbeat is steady beneath my ear, a rhythm more grounding than the music surrounding us.

We move together, no longer really dancing so much as holding each other while swaying to the music. The moment feels suspended in time, a perfect bubble of peace in the eye of the storm that has been our lives for months.

I feel his lips press against my hair. “Thank you,” he murmurs.

“For what?”

“For not giving up. On this place. On me.”

I lift my head to look at him. In the soft light, his features seem both sharper and more vulnerable than usual, the mask of the confident billionaire momentarily set aside.

“I almost did,” I remind him, honesty compelling me to acknowledge how close we came to losing everything.

“But you didn’t.” His thumb traces my cheekbone. “You fought. You stayed. Even when I gave you every reason to walk away.”

The music begins to fade, the pianist bringing the piece to a gentle close. In the distance, voices grow louder as our private moment rapidly approaches its end.

Bash’s hand cups my face, his thumb stroking softly across my lower lip. “I don’t deserve you, Savannah Bishop.”

“No,” I agree, a smile tugging at my lips. “But you’re stuck with me anyway.”

He laughs, the sound warm and genuine. Then, with

perfect timing, he steps back just as the ballroom doors open to admit the first wave of photographers and journalists.

Bash doesn't drop my hand, though. Instead, he stands beside me, fingers intertwined with mine, as the cameras begin to flash and exclamations of appreciation fill the room.

"Mr. Alderidge!" A photographer calls. "How about a solo shot by the main chandelier?"

Bash smiles politely but doesn't move. "I think we'll do this together."

The subtle emphasis on "together" sends a wave of warmth through me. This isn't just about optics or presenting a united front. This is Bash declaring something deeper, more significant.

As we pose for the first official photographs of the Imperial Club's grand reopening, I feel the weight of the tiny chandelier bracelet against my wrist. A reminder of what we've built. What we've overcome. What we've become.

The head of PR approaches, clipboard in hand, ready to guide us through the media circuit. Bash gives my hand one last squeeze before we step into our roles as hosts.

But just before we separate, he leans close to my ear, his voice for me alone.

"This is just the beginning," he whispers, and I hear the promise in his words, not just for the Imperial, but for us.

I meet his gaze, allowing myself to fully believe in that promise for the first time. "I know."

And as we turn to welcome the world into the space we've created together, I feel something settle within me. Not just pride, though that's certainly part of it. But something deeper. More permanent.

Belonging.

I belong here, in this magnificent place that once seemed impossible, beside this man who fought to keep me

Lily Rae

when he could have walked away. I belong to this life we're building, brick by brick, truth by truth.

The cameras flash, capturing the moment for posterity. But they can't capture what matters most: the invisible thread connecting Bash and me across the room, stronger than any force that tried to break it.

We did it. We survived. We built something beautiful from the ruins.

And we're just getting started.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Bash

The private elevator doors slide open to reveal our penthouse, and I watch Savannah's face as the city lights spill across her features. Her eyes meet mine, their hazel depths swimming with something primal and hungry, mirroring the heat that's been building in my veins all evening.

Even after three weeks of her living here—her clothes hanging beside mine, her favorite mug in the cabinet, her scent lingering on my sheets—I still feel that same electric jolt when I bring her home. Like I've captured lightning and somehow convinced it to stay.

"Home," I murmur, my hand finding the small of her back as we step into our space.

The Imperial Club's reopening has been nothing short of triumphant—press raving, investors thrilled, the ballroom packed with Manhattan's elite. But I've spent the entire night on edge, watching Savannah move through the crowd with graceful authority, making mental calculations of how long we needed to stay before I could have her alone.

I close the door behind us, the soft click of the latch like a starting pistol.

“Drink?” I ask, shrugging off my jacket and draping it over the back of a chair.

Savannah turns, the city lights casting half her face in shadow, half in golden illumination. She shakes her head, reaching up to remove one of her earrings.

“Not thirsty?” I walk toward her, loosening my bow tie but not removing it.

“Not for a drink.” Her voice is low, something electric running beneath the words.

My mouth curves into a slow smile, recognition flooding my system. We’ve been circling this moment all night, my hand lingering at her waist during photos, her fingers brushing mine as we toasted the club’s success, our eyes locking across the crowded ballroom with promises neither of us voiced.

I stop before her, close enough to catch the scent of her perfume, something floral with an undercurrent of spice. My fingers find her wrist, tracing the delicate bracelet I gave her earlier.

“You’ve been thinking about this all night, haven’t you?” I ask, my voice dropping to a register that makes her pupils dilate slightly.

“Haven’t you?” she counters, the slightest tremor in her voice betraying her composure.

I laugh softly, capturing her other earring as she removes it and placing both on the console table beside us.

“Since the moment you walked into the ballroom wearing this dress.”

My hand skims down her side, feeling the sleek fabric and the curves beneath. The dress hugs her like a second

skin, showcasing every dip and swell of her body in a way that had me fighting for focus all evening.

“You know what I thought when I saw you?” I continue, my fingers finding the zipper at the back of her dress.

She swallows, her eyes never leaving mine. “What?”

“I thought about how fucking beautiful you’d look coming apart underneath me.” I slide the zipper down with deliberate slowness, exposing inch after inch of her bare back. “How I’d make you forget every word except my name.”

Her breath catches, fingers curling against the fabric of my shirt.

“Pretty confident, aren’t you?”

“Always.” I smile against her temple, pressing a kiss there. “But especially about this.”

The zipper reaches its end, and her dress loosens, held up only by her shoulders. I run my hands back up her spine, feeling her shiver beneath my touch.

“Turn around,” I command softly.

She hesitates for just a moment, just long enough to remind me that Savannah Bishop never simply yields. She turns slowly, back to me, the city lights sprawling before her through the windows.

I slip the dress from her shoulders, watching as it pools around her feet in a whisper of expensive fabric. She’s left in nothing but a black lace thong and heels, her back a graceful curve against the night sky beyond.

“Fuck.” The word escapes me like a prayer. I run my hands down her sides, her skin warm silk beneath my palms. “Look at you.”

She glances over her shoulder, her hair falling across one eye in a way that makes my cock throb against my tuxedo pants. “Your turn.”

I turn her back to face me, catching her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “Not yet. First, I want to see what I’ve been imagining all night.”

I step back, just enough to take her in fully. The golden light from the city spills across her body, highlighting the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist, and the flare of her hips. My eyes travel over every inch of her, committing this moment to memory.

“You going to just look all night?” she challenges, but I catch the flush spreading across her chest and the way her nipples have hardened under my gaze.

“Not a chance.” I close the distance between us, my mouth finding hers in a kiss that starts controlled but quickly ignites into something hungry and demanding.

Her lips part beneath mine, her tongue meeting the thrust of mine as my hands roam her body, cupping her breasts, thumbs brushing over her nipples, drawing a moan from her throat that I swallow eagerly.

“Bedroom,” she gasps against my mouth, her fingers already working at the buttons of my shirt.

“Not yet.” I catch her wrists, pulling them behind her back and holding them there with one hand. The position arches her body toward me, breasts thrust forward, head tilted back, exposing the elegant line of her throat.

“I’ve been patient all night. Now it’s your turn.”

Her eyes flash with a mix of arousal and defiance that makes my cock pulse in response. I love that she never just surrenders, that taking her is always a conquest, even when she wants it as badly as I do.

I press my mouth to her throat, teeth grazing the sensitive spot just below her ear that makes her whole body tremble.

“Do you know how many men were watching you

tonight?" I murmur against her skin. "How many of them wanted exactly what I'm about to take?"

Her pulse jumps beneath my lips. "Don't care about them."

"Good." I nip at her earlobe. "Because you're mine. Every inch of you."

I release her wrists to cup her face, kissing her deeply while walking her backward toward the large glass windows overlooking the city. Her back meets the cool glass, drawing a gasp from her lips that I capture with my mouth.

"Bash—" she breathes as I break the kiss, my hands sliding down to her breasts.

"Shh." I circle her nipples with my thumbs, watching her eyes flutter closed. "I've been thinking about tasting these all night."

I lower my head, replacing my thumb with my mouth, drawing her nipple between my lips and sucking hard. Her head falls back against the glass, a moan escaping her throat as her hands find my hair, fingers threading through the strands.

"Fuck," she breathes, her hips rocking forward, seeking friction.

I smile against her skin, moving to her other breast while my hand slides down her stomach, tracing the edge of her thong. I can feel the heat radiating from her core, the evidence of her arousal dampening the delicate lace.

"What do you need, Savannah?" I murmur, looking up at her while my fingers tease along the edge of her thong.

Her eyes open, dark with desire. "You know what I need."

"Say it." I straighten, towering over her, my still-clothed body pressing hers against the window. "I want to hear you say it."

She swallows, a flash of that defiance crossing her features. Then, deliberately, she rolls her hips against mine.

“I need you to fuck me, Sebastian.”

The use of my full name sends a jolt of electricity down my spine. I growl low in my throat, capturing her mouth in a bruising kiss as my fingers finally slip beneath the lace of her thong, finding her slick and ready.

“So wet,” I murmur against her lips. “Is this all for me?”

“Yes,” she gasps as I circle her clit with my thumb, her hips bucking against my hand. “God, yes.”

I slip one finger inside her, then a second, feeling her body clench around me. Her nails dig into my shoulders through my shirt as I curl my fingers, finding that spot that makes her whole body shudder.

“Bash—” she moans, her head falling forward against my chest. “Please—”

“Please what?” I continue the rhythmic motion of my fingers, my thumb still working her clit in slow circles.

“I need—” she breaks off with a gasp as I increase the pressure. “I need more.”

I withdraw my hand, drawing a whimper of protest from her that turns into a gasp as I drop to my knees before her. I hook my fingers into her thong, dragging it down her legs until she can step out of it, leaving her in nothing but her heels.

“Hold onto me,” I instruct, guiding one of her legs over my shoulder, opening her completely to my gaze.

The sight of her, swollen and glistening with need, makes my cock throb painfully against the confines of my pants. I lean forward, dragging my tongue through her folds in one long, deliberate stroke that has her crying out, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Fuck, you taste good,” I murmur against her, circling her clit with my tongue before sucking it between my lips.

Her hips buck against my face, seeking more pressure, more friction. I hold her steady with one arm around her waist, the other hand sliding up to capture a breast, pinching her nipple in time with the strokes of my tongue.

“Bash—” she gasps, her head falling back against the glass. “I’m going to—”

I increase the pressure, driving two fingers back inside her while my tongue works her clit relentlessly. I feel her body tensing, the tremors starting deep inside her as she approaches the edge.

“Come for me,” I command against her flesh. “I want to taste it.”

Her body obeys, clenching around my fingers as a cry tears from her throat. I continue the motion of my tongue, gentler now, drawing out her pleasure until she’s trembling and pushing weakly at my head, oversensitive.

I rise to my feet, capturing her mouth in a deep kiss that lets her taste herself on my tongue. Her hands push at my shirt, fumbling with buttons, her movements desperate and uncoordinated in the aftermath of her orgasm.

“Easy,” I murmur, helping her with the buttons before shrugging the shirt off my shoulders. “We’ve got all night.”

Her hands smooth over my chest, nails scraping lightly down my abs in a way that makes my muscles contract.

“Too many clothes,” she complains, reaching for my belt.

I let her unfasten it, the metallic sound of the buckle loud in the quiet room. She unzips my pants with deliberate slowness, her eyes on mine as she pushes them down along with my boxers, freeing my cock.

“Christ,” I hiss as her hand wraps around me, her touch both too much and not enough.

“My turn,” she says, a wicked gleam in her eye as she starts to sink to her knees.

I catch her before she can, hauling her back up against me. “Later,” I growl, lifting her with ease. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively, her wet heat pressing against my cock. “Right now, I need to be inside you.”

I carry her to the couch, closer than the bedroom, and sit with her straddling me. She rises on her knees, positioning herself above me, her eyes locked on mine as she slowly sinks down, taking me inch by inch.

“Fuck,” we both gasp in unison as she settles fully, her body clenching around me like a vise.

For a moment, we’re still, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air. Then she rolls her hips experimentally, drawing a groan from deep in my chest.

“That’s it,” I encourage, my hands finding her hips, guiding her into a rhythm. “Take what you need.”

She moves above me, finding her pace, her hands braced on my shoulders for leverage. The sight of her is almost enough to push me over the edge: her head thrown back, breasts bouncing with each movement, the sheen of sweat making her skin glow in the city lights.

“So fucking beautiful,” I murmur, leaning forward to capture a nipple between my teeth.

She cries out, her pace faltering, and I use the opportunity to flip our positions, laying her back on the couch and hovering over her. I hook one of her legs over my arm, changing the angle as I drive back into her.

“Oh God,” she gasps, her eyes widening as I hit deeper than before.

I establish a punishing rhythm, each thrust drawing

sounds from her throat that fuel my own arousal. I can feel her building toward another peak, her body tightening around mine.

“Look at me,” I command, slowing my pace just enough to draw a whimper of protest from her. “I want to see your eyes when you come on my cock.”

Her gaze locks with mine, pupils blown wide with desire. I reach between us, my thumb finding her clit, circling it in time with my thrusts.

“That’s it,” I encourage as her breathing quickens, her body tensing beneath mine. “Let go for me, Savannah.”

Her orgasm washes over her in a wave, her body arching off the couch, her inner muscles clenching around me in a way that nearly drags me over the edge with her. I continue thrusting through her climax, drawing it out, watching the pleasure play across her features.

“Bash—” she gasps, her nails raking down my back. “I want to feel you come.”

The words, combined with the sensation of her body still pulsing around mine, shatter my control. My rhythm falters, hips jerking as my release tears through me, filling her with wave after wave of heat.

I collapse beside her on the couch, our bodies still joined, both of us breathing heavily. I brush a strand of sweat-dampened hair from her face, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“That was...” she trails off, words failing her.

“Just the beginning,” I finish for her, my hand tracing lazy patterns on her hip. “I’m nowhere near done with you tonight.”

She laughs softly, the sound vibrating against my chest.

“Promises, promises.”

I capture her chin, tilting her face up to mine. “I always

keep my promises, Savannah. You should know that by now.”

Her eyes soften, something beyond desire flickering in their depths. She reaches up, fingers tracing the line of my jaw. “I do know that.”

I press a kiss to her palm, then gather her against me, our bodies fitting together like pieces of a puzzle finally finding their match. Outside, the city continues its endless rhythm, but in here, it’s just us: the culmination of everything we’ve fought for and everything we’ve built.

“Shower?” she suggests after a moment, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

“In a minute.” I hold her closer, savoring the weight of her against me, the scent of her skin, the steady beat of her heart. “Let me just enjoy this.”

She settles against me, her breathing evening out. In the quiet, I realize something that should terrify me but somehow doesn’t: I would burn down empires to keep her this close. To protect what we’ve found.

“What are you thinking about?” she murmurs, sensing the shift in my mood.

I tilt her chin up, meeting her gaze directly.

“That I’m never letting you go again.”

Instead of the hesitation I half-expected, her eyes fill with certainty.

“Good,” she says simply. “Because I’m not going anywhere.”

I kiss her then, slow and deep, pouring every unspoken promise into the connection of our lips. When I pull back, I see the same hunger returning to her eyes that I feel building again in my body.

“Now,” I say, rising and pulling her up with me, “about that shower...”

Empire of Desire

I lead her toward the master bathroom, knowing that the night has only just begun. We have victories to celebrate, a future to christen, and hours until morning—and I intend to use every minute showing her exactly what she means to me, what we've become together.

Whatever challenges tomorrow brings, tonight belongs to us.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Bash

I YEAR LATER

I stand at the edge of The Imperial Club's newest addition, the Garden Suite, watching Manhattan's elite mingle among ornate floral arrangements and crystal chandeliers. My fingers tap against the folded magazine in my hand, Luxe Magazine's latest issue with our club splashed across the cover:

"Most Iconic New Venues In The World."

Not bad for a place they said would never open.

The Betty Room, as we've officially renamed it, is a masterpiece of modern luxury with traditional touches. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook our meticulously landscaped gardens, while inside, the walls showcase framed photographs of wildflowers from Virginia alongside Manhattan's skyline. The perfect fusion of Savannah's roots and our future.

"You're looking particularly pleased with yourself," Xander says, appearing at my shoulder with two glasses of champagne. My older brother has softened around the

edges since his own marriage to Reyna, though he'd deny it if confronted.

I accept the glass. "Just admiring the view."

"The club or your fiancée-to-be?" He nods toward Savannah, who stands across the room in deep conversation with Reyna and Isla. The three of them have become an unexpected alliance over the past year, brilliant, fierce women who've collectively transformed our family legacy into something none of us could have imagined alone.

"I haven't asked her yet," I remind him, feeling the weight of the black box in my jacket pocket. "She could say no."

Xander actually laughs. "She won't."

"Such confidence in my charms?" I take a sip of champagne, masking my own nerves behind practiced nonchalance.

"No," Xander replies. "Confidence in what you've built together."

The word *together* catches in my chest. It's been one year since The Imperial Club's grand reopening. One year since Savannah stood beside me against Wolfe's machinations. One year of building something that wasn't just mine, but ours.

Wolfe himself has become little more than an afterthought, a scar we all survived. Last I heard, the federal investigation into his corporate sabotage was still ongoing, with a trial date set for next spring. The man who once terrorized our family has now been reduced to occasional headlines in the business section.

"Speaking of building," Xander says, lowering his voice. "The board approved the Paris expansion yesterday. You're the obvious choice to helm it."

I turn to face him fully. “Another Imperial Club? In Paris?”

“We’re thinking more exclusive, more—”

“No.”

Xander blinks. “No? This is an opportunity to—”

“To what? Build another monument to the Alderidge name?” I shake my head. “I’m good right here.”

His eyes narrow slightly. “This could double your portfolio’s value in three years.”

“I’ve got everything I need to build right here,” I say, my gaze drifting back to Savannah. Her laughter carries across the room as she touches Isla’s arm, leaning in to share some private joke. The black dress she wears tonight hugs every curve, her hair swept up in an elegant style that exposes the graceful line of her neck.

“You built an empire,” I tell Xander. “I built my world.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes, and for once, my older brother doesn’t argue. Instead, he clinks his glass against mine.

“To different kinds of success, then.”

We’re interrupted by the gentle tapping of a spoon against glass. The room quiets as Reyna steps forward, Isla and Savannah flanking her like a triumvirate of power in elegant cocktail dresses.

“If I could have everyone’s attention,” Reyna begins, her voice carrying effortlessly across the hushed room. “We’d like to propose a toast.”

The assembled guests, board members, family, and a select few friends, turn toward the three women. My mother stands near the windows, her face soft with pride. Lucas leans against the bar, giving me a knowing wink that suggests he’s been briefed on whatever’s about to happen.

“One year ago,” Reyna continues, “we stood in the ball-

room downstairs and celebrated not just the opening of The Imperial Club, but a new chapter for Alderidge-Hathaway Global.”

Isla steps forward.

“Since then, we’ve seen unprecedented growth, sustainability innovations that have changed the industry, and partnerships that have redefined what luxury means in Manhattan.”

Savannah’s eyes find mine across the room as she takes her turn.

“But what we’re celebrating tonight isn’t just business success. It’s what happens when we choose what matters most.”

The three women raise their glasses.

“To what we choose to keep,” they say in unison.

A chorus of “hear, hear” ripples through the crowd as glasses are raised. I drain mine in one swallow, my free hand slipping into my pocket to touch the small velvet box there.

This wasn’t part of the plan. I’d intended to wait, to create some elaborate moment worthy of Savannah. But watching her now, confident, radiant, completely in her element in a room that bears her mother’s name, I realize there’s no moment more perfect than this one.

I set my empty glass on a passing waiter’s tray and cross the room to her. Conversation quiets as I approach, a subtle shift in the atmosphere that suggests Lucas might have spread the word about what’s coming.

“Bash,” Savannah says as I reach her, a question in her eyes. “Everything okay?”

“Better than okay,” I reply, taking her hand. “I was just thinking about what you said. About what we choose to keep.”

A small furrow appears between her brows. “And?”

The room has gone completely silent now. From the corner of my eye, I can see Xander's arm around Reyna's waist, my mother's hand pressed to her heart, and Isla's knowing smile. But I focus only on Savannah, reaching into my pocket and withdrawing the small black box.

Her breath catches, eyes widening as I open it to reveal the emerald-cut diamond set in platinum, elegant, distinctive, and unmistakably hers.

I'd told myself we weren't about grand gestures or public spectacles. That I'd simply hold the ring between us, an offering rather than a claim. But looking at her now, this woman who broke every wall I built, I find myself sinking to one knee, the marble floor hard against my leg. The room gasps. This isn't the Sebastian Alderidge they know. It's the man only she sees.

"This isn't a power move," I tell her, my voice low enough that only those closest to us can hear. "This isn't strategy. This is me, on my knees for the only thing that's ever mattered. This is me asking to stay."

Savannah's eyes shimmer with unshed tears, but her smile is radiant, her hand trembling as it covers her mouth.

"You want to stay?" she whispers, like she still can't quite believe it.

"With you. For you. Building whatever comes next, together." I hold her gaze steadily, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Will you marry me, Savannah Bishop?"

The room holds its breath, though there isn't a person present who doesn't already know her answer.

Still, when she whispers "Yes," the simple word carries such weight that I feel it settle into my bones.

I slide the ring onto her finger, and the world narrows to just this: her hand in mine, the cool metal warming against

her skin, the diamond catching light and scattering it like the fragments of my former life before her.

Something primal and possessive surges through me when I see my ring on her finger. Not because she's mine, but because I'm finally, completely hers.

When I look up, tears track down her cheeks, each one a testament to walls fallen, battles fought, surrenders we both needed to make.

"I wasn't expecting this," she admits, voice rough with emotion.

"Good." I brush my thumb across her cheek, collecting the wetness there. "I like keeping you on your toes."

Her laugh breaks through the tears, that rare, unguarded sound that still hits me like a shot of whiskey, warm and burning and real.

"You've never stopped, Bash Alderidge."

The room erupts around us, applause and cheers crashing like waves, but I keep her close, creating a fortress with my body. In this moment, they can have the spectacle, but her vulnerability belongs only to me.

"You sure about this?" I ask, half-joking, half-desperate for confirmation. "Life with me isn't exactly peaceful."

Her eyes lock with mine, that familiar challenge sparking between us.

"Peace is overrated," she counters, fingers tightening around mine. "I prefer passion."

I kiss her then, not the gentle, public kiss expected in polite company, but something hungry and claiming that draws more cheers from our audience. A promise of what waits when we're alone. When we part, her pupils are dilated, her lips slightly swollen. Mine.

I catch Xander's approving nod, my mother wiping away tears, and Lucas raising his glass in a silent toast.

“To the future Mrs. Alderidge,” someone calls out, and I feel Savannah stiffen slightly beside me.

“Actually,” she says, her voice carrying clear and confident, “I’ll be keeping my name. Bishop has a certain ring to it, don’t you think?” Her eyes meet mine, a challenge and a promise wrapped in one.

“Bishop-Alderidge has a nice sound to it,” I offer, surprising myself. “For both of us.”

Her eyes widen slightly, realizing what I’m suggesting. “Sebastian Bash Bishop-Alderidge? That’s quite a mouthful.”

“I’ve never been one for doing things halfway.”

The look she gives me is worth every risk I’ve ever taken, every battle we’ve fought to get here. “No,” she says softly. “You certainly haven’t.”

The celebration continues around us as family and friends approach with congratulations. My mother embraces Savannah like the daughter she’s become, whispering something that makes Savannah’s eyes fill with tears again.

Xander claps me on the back while Reyna admires the ring, and Isla makes some comment about “the playboy finally meeting his match” that has everyone laughing.

But through it all, I keep Savannah close, marveling at how completely my life has transformed in the span of a year. The man I was before her, restless, reckless, forever chasing the next thrill, feels like a stranger now.

Later, as the party winds down and guests begin to depart, I find Savannah by the windows overlooking the garden. The June evening has painted the sky in shades of purple and gold, the city lights beginning to sparkle against the darkening canvas.

“Any regrets?” I ask, sliding an arm around her waist.

She leans into me, her head finding that perfect spot against my shoulder.

“About saying yes? Not one.”

“About the past year? The club, Wolfe, all of it?”

Her hand rises to rest against my chest, the diamond on her finger catching the light. “I used to think legacy was something people left behind. Something you buried or ran from.”

I cover her hand with mine. “And now?”

“Now I think it’s something you build.” She turns in my arms to face me. “Look at what we’ve created, Bash. Not just the club. Us. This.”

I glance around the room that bears her mother’s name, thinking of the past year: the battles won, the trust rebuilt, the future mapped out in shared dreams rather than solitary ambitions.

“The legacy we choose,” I murmur, echoing her earlier toast.

“Exactly.” Her smile holds all the secrets we’ve shared, all the promises we’ve kept. “And I choose you. Every day.”

“Lucky me,” I say, but the words come out more reverent than teasing.

She laughs softly. “I think we’re both pretty lucky, all things considered.”

I pull her closer, thinking of how far we’ve come—from that first night at the hotel bar when she walked away to standing in this room that symbolizes everything we’ve built together.

“You know what the best part is?” I ask, my lips brushing her temple.

“What’s that?”

“Everyone’s watching,” I whisper against her skin, “and no one doubts it.”

Her eyes meet mine, understanding passing between us. The playboy they all wrote off built something they couldn't touch. And the woman they nearly destroyed? Became the reason we still stand.

"Take me home," she says simply.

As we say our goodbyes and make our way through the club toward the waiting car, I can't help but marvel at how completely my definition of home has changed. Once, it was a penthouse with a view, a showcase of wealth and status. Now, it's wherever she is—her smile, her challenge, her unwavering belief that I am more than the reputation that preceded me.

The Imperial Club stands as testament to what we've overcome, but the real legacy isn't in the marble floors or crystal chandeliers. It's in the way Savannah's hand fits perfectly in mine as we step out into the Manhattan night, our future stretching before us like the city skyline: bright, limitless, and entirely our own.

Some men build empires. I built my world around her. And watching the diamond catch the streetlights as she slides into the car beside me, I know I made the better choice.

Epilogue

Savannah

2 YEAR LATER

I trace the delicate crystal petals of the chandelier above me, fingers hovering just shy of touching. Two years since launch, one year into marriage, and sometimes I still can't believe we pulled it off.

The Imperial Club—Bash's legacy, our future.

"Admiring your handiwork again?" Bash's voice slides across my skin like warm honey, his arms wrapping around my waist from behind.

I lean into him, savoring the solid warmth of his chest.

"Someone has to make sure everything stays perfect for tonight."

"It already is." His lips brush my neck, right below my ear. "You are."

The diamond on my finger catches the light as I turn in his embrace. One year married, and the weight of it still feels like a beautiful dream.

"They're arriving," I murmur, hearing the distant chatter of voices in the grand foyer.

Tonight marks the second anniversary of the Imperial Club's opening—and the first gathering of the entire Alderidge family since Xander and Reyna announced their baby news. A celebration of everything we've built since those chaotic days of secrets and sabotage.

"Let them wait," Bash whispers, his fingers trailing down my spine. "I'm not done with you yet."

I laugh and push against his chest. "Your brothers will never let you hear the end of it if we're late."

"Worth it," he growls, but releases me with a reluctant sigh.

THE GRAND BALLROOM OF THE IMPERIAL CLUB GLOWS with soft amber light, crystal chandeliers casting prisms across marble floors. I pause in the doorway, taking in the scene before me.

Xander stands near the windows, one arm wrapped protectively around Reyna's waist as she laughs at something Eli has said. The eldest Alderidge brother has softened over the past years, his sharp edges worn smooth by love. Beside him, Reyna radiates confidence, her hand resting on her slightly rounded belly—their newest addition to the Alderidge legacy, due in four months.

Eli and Isla move like perfect counterparts, her vibrant energy balancing his steady calm. Their hands remain linked even as they speak with others, as if letting go might break something precious between them.

"Savannah!" Mama voice cuts through the crowd as she approaches, her smile radiant. Betty Bishop—now the Imperial Club's exclusive botanical designer—looks nothing like the worried woman whose flower shop nearly closed two

years ago. Beside her stands Maggie Alderidge, elegant as always, but with a warmth in her eyes that speaks of healing.

“The arrangements are stunning, Mama,” I say, hugging her tightly.

“Well, I had help.” She glances at Maggie, who smiles in return.

“We make quite the team,” Maggie says, her gaze drifting to her three sons. “Rather like them.”

Bash’s hand finds mine, squeezing gently. “Better than us, probably.”

“Without question,” Maggie laughs, patting his cheek. “Your father would be proud, you know. Not of the empire —” she gestures around the room, “—but of this. The family you’ve all built.”

Something tightens in my chest at the mention of Edward Alderidge, the man whose will set everything in motion. The man who, even in death, brought us all together.

“He had a strange way of showing it,” Bash says, but there’s no bitterness in his voice anymore.

“He was playing the long game,” Xander adds, joining our circle with Reyna at his side. “Just like we are.”

Eli and Isla complete our gathering, champagne glasses in hand.

“To the Alderidge Empire,” Eli proposes, raising his glass. “Not the buildings or the businesses—”

“But the people,” Isla finishes, her eyes bright with emotion.

“The legacy we choose,” Reyna adds, her free hand resting protectively over her stomach.

We raise our glasses, the crystal catching light like stars.

“To us,” Bash murmurs against my ear, his voice for me alone. “To the risk that was worth taking.”

I turn my face to his, not caring who watches.

“The best risk I ever took.”

His kiss tastes like champagne and promises—of passion, of partnership, of a future built on our terms. When we part, I catch Xander watching us, his expression uncharacteristically soft as he pulls Reyna closer.

Across the room, Eli whispers something that makes Isla laugh, her copper hair catching fire in the chandelier light. Our mothers stand together, heads bent in conversation, united by the children who found each other.

The empire Edward Alderidge built might be made of steel and glass and billion-dollar deals, but the legacy we’ve created is built of stronger stuff—of trust reclaimed, of hearts that broke and healed stronger, of love chosen freely despite every reason to walk away.

Bash’s hand finds the small of my back, warm and steady.

“Dance with me?”

As he leads me to the center of the ballroom, the others join us—three brothers who found their matches, three women who refused to settle, two mothers who watched it all unfold.

The Alderidge Empire stands, transformed by the hearts that now rule it.

And as Bash pulls me close, his heartbeat steady against mine, I know this isn’t our ending.

It’s just the beginning of everything we’ve chosen to build together.

Empire of Desire

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Sneak Peek

XANDER AND REYNA'S STORY

Late afternoon sun slants through the windows of Alderidge Global's conference room. Manhattan's towers light up one by one as dusk approaches.

I've positioned myself at the head of the mahogany table—Edward Alderidge's traditional seat. My fingers trace the leather armrest, focusing on its coolness rather than the nerves twisting my stomach. The merger papers blur slightly as I remember last quarter's devastating stock manipulation. Victor's handiwork.

Like hell I'm letting another man dictate my future.

Edward's portrait looms behind the chair, his stern expression a reminder of everything the Alderidge name represents. Everything I've fought against since Victor nearly destroyed the Hathaway legacy. A legacy now mine to protect.

The door opens with a soft click.

"You're in my father's chair."

I don't look up.

"Your father's dead, Mr. Alderidge. And this isn't your company. Yet."

Sneak Peek

Alexander moves closer, his cologne—something expensive and maddeningly enticing—teasing my senses. I keep my eyes on the contract, though the words swim before me.

Don't look up. Don't give him the satisfaction.

“Interesting interpretation of the merger terms.” His voice carries a hint of amusement that sets my teeth on edge. “Especially considering the addendum.”

Now I do look up, and immediately wish I hadn't. Alexander Alderidge fills my vision, dark suit accentuating broad shoulders that match his father's imposing presence. But where Edward's portrait shows cold authority, his son's steel-gray eyes hold something far more dangerous—intelligence mixed with unconcealed interest. Heat crawls up my neck as his gaze locks with mine.

“What addendum?” The words come out sharper than intended.

He slides a document across the table.

“Page seventeen, paragraph four. I believe you'll find it... illuminating.”

My fingers definitely don't tremble as I reach for the paper.

“Another one of your hostile takeover tricks?”

“Read it.”

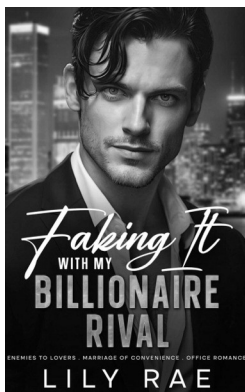
I scan the text, my heart stopping then racing. “This is impossible.”

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About the Author

I craft steamy billionaire romances that pulse with fiery passion, deep emotion, and unforgettable characters. My commanding, irresistibly powerful heroes and fierce, alluring heroines clash and connect in a dance of power, trust, and redemption, set against the seductive allure of luxurious, high-stakes worlds.

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