

a reckless note

THE BRILLIANCE TRILOGY BOOK ONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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All characters in this book are fiction and figments of the author's imagination.

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Dear Reader,

I'm excited to take The Brilliance Trilogy journey with you. A few things I want to point out: Much of the history about the Stradivarius violin you'll read in the story, and even that of Antonio Stradivari, is real, but I did throw in a large dose of fiction. Also, if you're interested, I'm a big David Garrett fan and he inspired my creation of Kace August, though Kace is fictional and not meant to be a duplication of the real David Garrett's life. However, you might find it fun to look up David Garrett and discover a real rock star who is ever so talented ☺

I hope you enjoy the story!

Lisa

playlist

Bitter Sweet Symphony by The Verve
The Four Seasons by Antonio Vivaldi
Love on the Brain by Rhianna
Bitter by Fletcher (with Kito)
Purple Rain by Prince
Secrets by OneRepublic
Carmina Burana by Carl Orff
Into You by Fabolous (feat. Tamia)
I Need a Doctor by Dr. Dre (feat. Eminem and Skylar Grey)

prologue

Gio—

When you touch me, I tremble. When I close my eyes and you're not here, I remember your touch, your hands on my body, your tongue on my skin. And when you kiss me, as silly as it might sound, I melt. I go places with you, do things with you, that I never knew I could welcome in my life. But it's all about you. It's all about what you make me feel.

I know you feel that I've become your "reckless note" in the never-ending pursuit of a story you cannot leave without a proper ending. But that's just it. I'm part of this story now. I'm part of your story. And I never meant for any of this to happen. I couldn't know that we'd meet and the world would spin beneath my feet, and somehow ignite a million shades of beauty in my life. I couldn't know that I'd change how you saw, well, everything.

Please don't do this. Don't shut me out.

I don't know who I am without you anymore.

We will find the answers you need together. We will find your family "recipe." I wasn't lying. The answers you need can be found with me and at the Riptide Auction House. I promise you. Come see me. I won't keep secrets any longer. I'm done with secrets.

Love forever,

Sofia

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chapter one

One reckless note can change everything.

My mother used to say that to me and my brother, Gio, and even in the years since she passed, the words echo in my mind, as I know they must in my brother's. After all, we heard those words on nearly a daily basis from the moment our father disappeared until the moment our mother died seven years later. I'd been eleven when my father disappeared and eighteen when my mother was murdered. Now, I'm twenty-eight and the only person I have left in this world is also missing. Gio forgot that saying, he forgot that a reckless note can also be deadly when you're born into our family. I've known for months that he forgot, but that letter from Sofia, whoever she is, confirms that his promises to stay away from our family secrets were not kept. And now I have to find him before it's too late, the way it was for mom and dad. I refuse to believe Gio is dead. He's protecting me. It's the only acceptable answer.

It's a mild October late afternoon, with the hot eighties temperatures finally breaking into the low sixties windy day as I approach the double glass doors of the world-renowned Riptide Auction House. Nerves flutter in my belly with the idea that I'm about to do everything my mother warned me never to do—I'm about to place myself in the middle of the world that destroyed our family. But I'm also trying to save the only family I have left. A security guard opens the door for me and I quickly smooth down my wind-blown, long, dark hair.

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“Welcome,” he greets.

“Thank you,” I say, shifting the Louis Vuitton briefcase my mother had given me for my high school graduation. She’d gotten it from a thrift shop and validated its authenticity. I didn’t care where it came from. It’s Louis Vuitton, a luxury I’d never known, though she had. We’d had money in Italy before we’d fled after my father’s disappearance, and did so with nothing. Unfortunately, the briefcase is the only thing I’m wearing that is a recognizable brand, but at least it pops against my basic black skirt and matching black silk blouse. Though as I walk under the extravagant chandelier that seems to have hundreds of dangling diamonds, and across floors so glossy white I need sunglasses, it doesn’t seem quite enough.

The receptionist desk is to the right, a long white number that shines like the floors, so shiny that I imagine this is the kind of desk heaven might have. The Italian in me clings to religion, and the idea of heaven right now, but I reject the idea of Gio being there with our parents, not here with me. He can’t leave me. I won’t let him leave me here alone.

There are three people spread out behind that fancy desk and I choose the friendly-looking redhead with a splatter of freckles on her button nose.

“Hi,” she greets. “I’m Amber. Can I help you?”

“Hi, yes.” I slide a card on the counter. “I’m Aria Alard,” I say, speaking my mother’s maiden name with the confidence she meant it to give me. No one here has to know who I really am. Ever. They can never know. We disappeared with my father, our historic bloodline ended forever. That’s what we let the world believe of my entire family. “I’m with Accent Collectibles,” I add. “Is Sofia here?”

Her brows furrow. “Sofia?”

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“I was told she works here.”

Her brow crinkles and she says, “No. There’s no Sofia here.”

Disappointment stabs at me. “I must have the name wrong. I’m interested in attending one of your auctions.”

“Of course.” She slides a piece of paper in front of me and presents me with a list. “These are the upcoming auctions.”

I scan a summary list of the hot ticket items I’m hoping for, but the list is long. “I’m looking for a violin I was informed you’d be auctioning off.”

“Let me check for you.” She punches keys on her keyboard and then frowns. “I don’t see anything about a violin.” She glances over at her co-worker. “Brenda, is there a violin being auctioned off?”

“I do believe there is,” she says, “but that’s for the VIP event. It’s closed to the public, invitation only.”

Another female employee steps to Amber’s side, and glances at me. “Apologies. I’ll be just one moment.” She lowers her voice and speaks to Amber. “Where did Mr. Compton go for lunch? I have a document he told me to rush over to him and I—well, I forgot the restaurant’s name.”

“Monroe’s,” Amber replies.

The other woman thanks her, apologizes to me again, and then leaves. Amber refocuses on me. “I’m sorry. You would have to have an invitation from Mr. Compton himself.”

“How do I meet Mr. Compton?”

“You can try attending the auction Friday night. I know he’ll be there.”

It’s Tuesday. Friday night is forever away when my brother’s missing and that violin is absolutely what my

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brother was after. “Do you happen to have any details about the violin?”

Amber eyes Brenda. Brenda replies, “We’re not at liberty to release any information for the VIP event, and honestly, I’ve said too much as it is.”

Defeat threatens, but I reject it. “Thank you,” I say, turning away and stuffing the auction schedule into my briefcase. I’m already googling Monroe’s before I even step outside the building.

I pause just outside as I pull up an address only a few blocks away. My brother is looking for a violin. He has to believe this one is special, perhaps one of the three our father owned, one of which our mother claimed hid a secret—the “recipe,” as Sofia had said, writing in obvious code, to make the renowned Stradivarius violin worth tens of millions of dollars. But I don’t care about the recipe. I care about finding my brother.

I hurry down the street and into the crush of the New York City sidewalk, the scent of roasting nuts from a street vendor teasing my hungry belly. Eating hasn’t exactly been on the top of my priority list the past few days but there is no time to stop now. I need to catch Mark before he departs from the restaurant. The walk is short and I quickly reach my destination, but I’m forced to step sharply behind a concrete column as the woman from the gallery exits the restaurant. Once I spy her heading down the sidewalk, I close the space between me and the dining spot but pause at the door to do my best to hand brush my hair into decent form.

Giving up, I decide I just have to do this. I enter the restaurant, and since I’ve read the Riptide website in detail, I scan for Mark Compton, based on his photo.

The hostess greets me. “Do you have a reservation?”

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“I do,” I say. “I’m with Mark Compton, but I’ll find him. I just need to head to the ladies’ room first.”

“Of course,” she says. “It’s to the far-right and so is his table.”

“Perfect,” I reply. “Thank you.”

I inhale and force my nerves down hard and fast, pulling forward the courage my mother showed when she raised us and protected us. I can do this. I will do this. *For my brother.*

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chapter two

The restaurant is dimly lit, with a navy-blue theme that carries through to chairs, square lights hanging from the ceiling, and apparently, even to the glassware. I'm fairly certain based on the level of fluff, that a lunch plate would cost my weekly grocery money, but my belly doesn't care. It rumbles loudly and the idea of my roasted nuts promises relief. For now, I weave through tables, forcing away a need for sustenance for a much more pressing matter: finding Gio.

I spy Mark, a good-looking man with classic looks, in the corner booth sitting in the center of two other men I can't make out. I close the space between me and him, noting his refined appearance. His blond hair is trimmed neatly, his features aristocratic, square and strong. And the man's blue suit is far more expensive than my purse. I have a last-minute fluttery moment of doubt that erupts inside my chest, but I push it down and away.

Stepping right in front of his table, I'm suddenly in the spotlight of not one, but three men, though I don't look at anyone but Mark. He's my path to answers. He's who matters. "Mr. Compton?"

He arches an incredibly practiced arrogant brow. "And you would be?"

"Aria Alard, with Accent Collectibles. I'm sorry to bother you, but I recognized you from your photo and I couldn't miss the chance to introduce myself. I have a wealthy buyer with a high seven figures to spend. I'm requesting a spot to bid in your VIP auction."

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“Well, Ms. Alard,” he says tightly, “who’s the buyer?”

“Me,” I say. “The buyer wishes to remain anonymous.”

“That’s not good enough,” he replies. “Not when I have VIPs I’m protecting.”

“In case you’re wondering,” the man to his left says, “he’s always this arrogant.”

I glance in his direction and he’s a gorgeous man with longish blond hair and a brightly inked tattoo down his arm, who doesn’t read as arrogant. Just powerful, and that power is the only reason he fits at this table with Mark. “Just push through it,” he adds. “Or go around him and talk to his wife.”

Mark’s jaw sets hard and he glances at the other man. “You don’t know your limits, Chris.”

“I know my limits,” he assures him. “You just don’t like that I know yours.”

Mark dismisses him and fixes his gray eyes on me. “What are you seeking?”

“A violin,” I say, thankful to this Chris person for the pressure that seems to have made Mark ask for more information.

“Your buyer likes music, does he?”

The words spoken by the man to Mark’s right draws my gaze and I blink into brilliant blue eyes framed by thick, longish dark hair and rugged, handsome features. I blanch with the knowledge of who this is. I’m standing across from the thirty-four-year-old rock star of violins. A man who uses his good looks, denim, leather, and arms tatted up with random colored musical notes to create an image. That along with his re-mixed versions of hot new pop hits has done what many believe impossible—he’s made the violin cool and sexy.

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“You’re,” I swallow hard and force myself not to act starstruck, which would certainly ensure I don’t make it into the VIP room. I regroup and instead of saying Kace August, I say, “accurate.”

His eyes, those famously blue eyes, narrow and his lips quirk slightly. Mark jumps in then and lifts a finger. “What song is playing right now?”

Ironically, there’s a violin playing in the restaurant right now, and the question is a test, of course. Do I know enough to be worthy of this auction? To win his respect defies my mother’s insistence that I deny my roots. This is not a work just anyone would know. But to fail could cost me the opportunity to find my brother. “‘The Four Seasons,’ Antonio Vivaldi.”

Mark glances over at Kace. “Is she right?”

“She is absolutely accurate,” he says using my own word, which I do not believe is an accident. His eyes warm on my face, ripe with surprise, but there is more. He’s pleased, I think. He likes that I know his world. I am drowning in this man’s blue eyes, and before I’m too far under to recover, I jerk my gaze to Mark. “Can I at least get a private viewing of the violin?”

“Leave your card and show up to Friday night’s event. Buy something. That’s the best way to show intent.”

Buy something, with all the money I do not have, I think, acid biting at my belly. I reach into my bag and pull out my card, setting it on the table in front of him. I can feel Kace’s eyes on my face, burning through me. That’s when he shocks me and speaks to me in Italian: “Cambiano i suonatori, ma la musica è sempre quella.”

It means, “the melody changes, but the song remains the same,” but directly translated it’s: “the players change, but the music is always the same.”

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I look at him and I know I shouldn't respond, I shouldn't connect myself to Italy with this man, but translation services are on my card. "No," I answer in English. "The musician, the player, makes all the difference, which is why he should have an instrument worthy of him." It's what my ancestor who created the Stradivarius violin believed. It's why he made the Stradivarius.

I glance back at Mark. "I'll be there Friday night."

And with that, I turn and start walking toward the exit.

chapter three

The sun is setting when I arrive back at Accent Collectibles, which is also where Gio and I both live in separate apartments. I quickly unlock the door and flip on the light to find our mail shoved under the door. I grab it, lock up and turn on the security system and then drop the mail on the counter to the right. The building is old, rumored to be haunted, but it was a steal when we bought it five years ago with our pooled funds. Stories of ghosts normally make me laugh, and thankfully thus far have proven to be myth, but tonight a creak from the upstairs has my nerves standing on edge.

I grab our leather-bound book where we log our customers' special requests, and hurry forward, walking past rows of books and trinkets that don't move fast enough to pay the bills. We count on being contracted to locate high-end collectibles. My translation services have helped during a few random large projects, but that work isn't steady.

Passing two offices, mine on the left, and Gio's on the right, I pause at the wooden stairs that lead to two separate apartments we had built when we bought the place, and I hesitate, listening for another creak. It doesn't come, but then suddenly I wonder if Gio is back. I rush up the stairs, drop my bag by my door, and knock on his. When he doesn't answer, I grab my keys and open his door, pushing it open to reveal his studio. I scan the room and the oversized brown leather couch and chairs that eat up the space. He's not immediately

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in view, and when my gaze lifts to the stairs leading to his bed, that space is empty.

“Gio?!” I call out and walk to the bathroom, but my hope is quickly dashed. He’s gone. He’s still gone.

Fear stabs at my heart and I exit the apartment, throwing myself into the only solution there is: finding him. I have to find him. He’d find me if I were lost. That’s what we do. We protect each other. I lock up his place and open mine. Entering the identical space, outside of furnishings, I flip my locks and then pass my light blue couch and chairs on the way up the stairs. Tossing my things on my bed, I find comfort in my view of what’s below, safe. I feel safe. Or rather I feel safer here than down there.

A few minutes later, I’m in leggings and a sweater, curled up on the bed, with an extra bag of nuts aside from the one I ate on the subway on my way home. I scan our customer book, and the list of outstanding items they hope we’ll locate for them. Next, I pull out the schedule the receptionist had given me. Apparently, the items are listed in more detail online and I quickly pull up the list. Immediately, a bottle of rare wine catches my attention. I have a client, an oilman with deep pockets, who collects fine wine. I do my research on this particular bottle, and once I’m ready to pitch to him, I dial his number.

“Ed, this is Aria.”

“Aria. Tell me something good.”

“I have a lead on a rare 1787 Château Lafite. It could run as high as three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was said to be a part of Thomas Jefferson’s collection. It’s not drinkable, though. This is for collectible purposes only.”

“I’m stunned at such a find. Yes.”

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Relief washes over me for more than one reason. I need to pay our bills. This will carry me for two full months.

“Count me in,” he continues. “I’ll put money in the escrow I set-up for you. When will I know if I can have it?”

“Friday night.”

“I can’t wait. If you need more—I’ll just deposit a bit extra to be safe.”

“You do remember we charge a seven percent fee?”

“I will happily pay it if you claim this treasure for me.”

“You’ll know the minute I know.” We disconnect and hope fills me. I’m closer to answers just by gaining Ed’s approval. And this is a good deal for the business. There was a time when we thought we’d do deals like this one often. I’ve avoided the auction houses to stay out of the spotlight, but no more. We have to pay the bills. And I, *oh damn*, I have to buy something to wear to this event. I need to look like I belong, and unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of friends walking around I might borrow clothes from. And with good reason: the people I care about disappear.

I scan the auction list again and look for any other item that might match a client’s needs. Unfortunately, I can’t find one. But this wine is a respectable purchase, albeit not the ten million a Stradivarius violin would sell for, but it’s going to have to do for now.

I don’t know how it happens, but I lean against my headboard and google Kace August. I have no business showing interest in this man, but I tell myself it has nothing to do with those blue eyes and all that talent. It’s simply that he’s too close to my roots for comfort. He’s potentially trouble for me. I need to know who I’m dealing with. But he’s a private person off the stage. I

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find only the basics. He's thirty-four. As a prodigal violinist, he studied with some of the best violinists in the world and did so as young as ten years old. He's traveled the world to perform. He's also been attached to a few actresses and models. Of course, he has been, and yet I replay our exchange today and the perfect roll of his tongue when he spoke Italian. I pull up one of the many YouTube videos of his performances and hit play. I sigh after the first is complete. He's brilliant. I wanted to play and be brilliant, too. I used to play. But that wasn't my destiny. And so, for now, I indulge myself. I get lost in listening to the beautiful way he plays.



The event at Riptide is formal and requires you to buy tickets, which are not cheap, but I buy my ticket. The formal nature of the auction at least works in my favor. A formal dress is hard to identify by label, which allows me to purchase a bargain. I buy a black dress with beautifully etched long black lace sleeves that cost under two hundred dollars. I buy Christian Louboutin black heels that cost far more, but the red soles tell people they cost money and I can wear them for work meetings as well. I manage to find a classic black Chanel purse on Craigslist for a fraction of the cost I'd pay otherwise. I also fretfully buy a few mix and match outfits, because I have to be ready to move in this upper echelon of the collectibles world. We should have been doing this already. I just pray I snag that bottle of wine to pay for all of this.

The auction begins at eight PM and I take an Uber rather than ride the subway to arrive at seven-thirty as was suggested on the website. Amber, the redheaded

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receptionist that I'd met before, greets me. "Welcome. I remember you."

I manage a smile despite my mixed feelings about being remembered. I've spent my entire life trying to blend in, trying to be someone I'm not. And yet, being remembered by Mark Compton and his staff is important tonight. "As I do you, Amber."

She smiles at her name and directs my next move. "We'll be holding this event in the 'Silver Room.' Follow the signs."

"Thank you."

I hurry across the white shiny tile, following the signs and the fancy dresses. This formality is for an open event. What must the VIP event be like? Nerves are lighting up my entire body and I walk down a long hallway to finally find double glass doors labeled "The Silver Room." Inhaling to calm myself, I open the door and enter a room filled with fancy dresses and suits, as well as waiters carrying champagne and finger foods.

I'm handed an auction list and I walk to one of the many tables covered in white tablecloths. I quickly scan the list, praying the wine is still a part of the offerings, and it is. Relief washes over me when suddenly a familiar pair of shark-blue eyes are staring at me. Kace August is standing across from me.

"I remember you," he says.

And as dangerous as it is for this man, a man deeply rooted in the world I'm hiding from, to remember me, I'm breathless with the idea that he has, in fact, remembered me.

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chapter four

Kace, Mr. Violin Rocker himself, is wearing a T-shirt with a blazer, and while he's not the only rebel in this crowd—I count a good half-dozen—he has this confidence about him that defies cotton and fine silk. It doesn't matter what this man wears. During my YouTube exploration, I admired him in a tuxedo for numerous classical performances and the effect was the same. He's a man who stands out in a crowd without even trying. And the two gorgeous women casting him sideways glances from the next table see it, too. He's a beautifully rugged man who plays just as beautifully. But I cannot forget that we are of the same world and despite how alluring this may be to me, that's why he's dangerous to me. So very dangerous, but still I find myself saying, "I remember you, too."

"Then it's mutual," he replies, though I'm not sure exactly what he means by that statement, but I swear there is interest in his eyes. Or it's wishful thinking I shouldn't be thinking at all. *He's dangerous*, I remind myself. I need to walk away.

"You know Italian," he comments.

"I do," I reply, offering nothing more. It's how I've been conditioned. Don't offer more than necessary, my mother had preached. But I also don't walk away.

"How?" he asks.

"I studied linguistics in college."

He arches a brow. "With what intent?"

It's a complicated question, I think. The truth is, language and music connect for me, both as ways to

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communicate, but I can't say that to him without opening the door to questions about my connection to music. And so, I say only, "There's the question of the hour," and because I want to take attention off Italy, where I was born, where my father made the Stradi, because the Stradivarius formula was lost, I add, "I speak Spanish, German, Chinese, and French as well."

"But do you speak sign language?" he asks, and then he signs, "You're beautiful."

My belly flutters and I remind myself that yes, he's flirting, but this is Kace August. He probably flirts with every woman he meets. I sign back, "Thank you."

"I'm impressed, Aria Alard. I myself speak all those languages, somewhat fluently. Italian and German quite well." A waiter walks by and he grabs two champagne flutes. "Drink?"

"I'm not a very good drinker and I have to bid tonight with someone else's money."

"Right. The Mark Challenge. He loves to play little power games with people. Sometimes not giving Mark Compton what he wants creates more interest, not less." He sets a glass in front of me. "And Chris was right. Mark's wife will cut right through that bullshit." He laughs without humor and sips his champagne. "None of us believed that man would ever get married."

"How do you know Mark?"

"We've run in the same circles for a good decade."

"I'd have thought musicians were more your type."

He arches a brow. "Why is that?"

"Because you're—" I stop. I've just told him that I know who he is.

He leans in closer, the small table shrinking smaller. "Because you know who I am."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "Yes. I know who you are."

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“Why didn’t you say something?”

“You were at lunch and I intruded. I wasn’t going to be rude, but I love the way you play.”

“You do know it’s okay to be one of my many haters. Of my music.” He winks. “Just not me.”

“I *love* how you play. I’m a fan.”

His eyes warm and he lifts his glass. “I do believe I am as well.”

“You are?”

His brilliant blue eyes warm and spike with a hint of mischief. “Yes,” he says, and suddenly I realize he’s not talking about the violin. He’s talking about me. “I absolutely am.”

“Ms. Alard.”

At Mark Compton’s voice, I straighten. “Mr. Compton.”

“I see your intent on making a showing tonight. What are you bidding on?”

“I have a client that very much wants the bottle of 1787 Château Lafite straight from Thomas Jefferson’s collection.”

“That’s going to go for around three hundred and fifty thousand. Are you really ready for that?”

Kace laughs. “You’re such a dick, Mark. Of course, she’s ready.”

Mark flicks him a look. “A word, Kace.” It’s an order I can’t imagine a man like Kace taking.

And I’m right. He doesn’t. “I’m better with a note,” he replies, and I don’t miss the musical reference others might. “I think I’ll stay right here with Aria.”

“It’s important or I wouldn’t be standing here.”

Kace’s lips press together and he downs his champagne. “Excuse me, Aria.” He pushes off the table and turns to Mark. “I’m here.” They walk away and I’m a nervous wreck.

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I grab the champagne and then set it down. No. I really do not drink well. “That’s not the way to empty your glass.”

The pretty blonde who’s joined me smiles. “We have plenty.”

Her dress is red with etched flowers on the sheer sleeves. Her eyes friendly. Her skin perfect.

“We?” I ask. “You work here?”

“I’m Crystal, Mark’s wife, but I worked here for my mother-in-law before she retired and he took over. You’re new to the auctions.”

I’m stunned at how nice she is. “You’re Mark’s wife?”

She laughs. “You sound baffled. Yes. And I get that reaction often.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just he’s so hard and you’re so—”

“Not hard? Yes, I know. He’s got a hard shell, but he’s a softy inside, though you might not want to tell him I said that.”

I laugh. “Ah no. I will not be telling your husband that you said he was a softy. I’m Aria Alard from Accent Collectibles, by the way. I’m interested in coming to the VIP event.”

“Did you talk to Mark about it?”

My hope that she can help fades. “Yes. Mark told me to come prove myself tonight and bid.”

“Oh my God. That man. What are you interested in bidding on?”

“The violin.”

“Of course. A phenomenal prize. Well, we do have a strict policy about the VIP events. We have celebrities among the crowd, but you aren’t required to buy anything to prove yourself. You just need to fill out an application. Once you’re approved, you’re cleared to

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attend all future VIP events. Call me here tomorrow and I can help you.”

Hope returns, a bright and shiny star in my otherwise dark sky right now. “Thank you.”

“Of course. We’re glad to have you and please do not feel it’s necessary to buy anything.”

“I really actually want one of the auction items. My client desperately wants the wine from the Thomas Jefferson collection. I don’t know why I haven’t thought of watching the auctions in the past.”

“I see we have a newbie tonight.”

The comment comes from a tall, good looking man in an expensive suit, his brown hair neatly styled. “We have a lot of new guests tonight,” Crystal replies, and a woman nudges her arm and whispers to her before she glances at me. “I need to attend to the auction, but good luck with your prize tonight. And call me tomorrow.”

“Thanks again, Crystal.”

“I’m Alexander Voss,” the man says. “And you are?”

“Aria,” I say, offering nothing more. I’ve said too much to too many people and so I do what I do often: I turn the conversation. “You’re a regular here?”

“Occasionally there’s an item that catches my attention. What are you after tonight?”

“Wine. What about you?”

“Wine.”

“Oh well. Isn’t this awkward? How vicious is our battle going to get?”

His eyes twinkle. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“How much are you going to make me pay?”

At that moment, the crowd parts and my gaze locks with Kace’s where he stands talking to Mark. He’s staring at me, his expression unreadable, but intense. I want to know why. I want to know, too badly for my

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own good. I can't seem to breathe with the heat rushing over my skin. I suck in a breath and I swear his gaze lowers to my mouth. God, what is happening?

"How much?" Alexander presses.

I jerk my gaze back to his. "I guess we'll see. Excuse me." I fade into the crowd, desperate to reach out to my client and press his limits. And the truth is, I need out of the scorching stare of Kace August.

chapter five

I exit the pre-auction cocktail room and step into the hallway, spying a giant podium with hundreds of tiny red roses in it. I follow the lush scent and step behind it to dial Ed. “Did we get it?” he asks anxiously.

“Not yet. I just want to be clear. You put 400k in the escrow to include my fee. How high do you want to go?”

“I’ll go the whole four-hundred and make up your fee tomorrow morning, but I’d rather not.”

“Okay. Well, I need you to know this is a bidding situation and there is at least one other bidder who really wants this wine.”

“Of course there is. Then go the four hundred thousand without regret.”

Relief washes over me. “Okay. I’ll let you know.” I disconnect and walk around to the flower display to find Kace a few feet away on the other side, talking on his phone. And I now know that his navy blue T-shirt and blazer are paired with dark jeans that hug his deliciously muscular body.

That I shouldn’t be noticing.

I pause, hating the idea of interrupting him at all, but if I stay where I’m at, it might seem as if I’m listening in. Decision made, I start walking. “Not this holiday. No. I need a break. I told you that.” His eyes lift and find me. “I’m not going to do this right now. Call me tomorrow.” He ends the call.

“Small world,” he says, and at the prod I pause, turning to face him, those stunning eyes of his fixed on me. Instantly, I feel the energy between us, the push

and pull, the charge. I tell myself it's my imagination. I tell myself I don't want this, but it's a lie, and while I hate lies, it's one of many I tell to survive.

"It is a small world," I reply, managing to sound impressively cool, but the energy is still pulsing in the air, consuming me, dragging me closer to him when I haven't taken a step. I start trying to reason it away. He's talented. I admire him. I fear him. The energy is all mine. But yet, I don't know. I do not believe I've ever felt anything like this with anyone else, ever. Not that I've let many men into my life. Unlike my brother, who whores around to cope with our situation, I shut myself off. I protect myself.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I add.

"*You are* far more interesting than that call." He says the words as if they're obvious rather than flirtation, though there's that energy between us. I think. I'm confused. "You met Crystal?" he asks.

"I did," I say. "You were right. She was helpful. She's going to get me into the VIP auction."

"I knew she would." He motions his hand. "She jumps right past Mark's bullshit."

I'm awkwardly staring at his hand, the hand that holds his bow. I wonder which bow he prefers and I jerk my gaze to his. Which I will never know because I won't ask. "I can't decide if you and Mark are friends or enemies."

He laughs a low, sexy rumble that sings like a rough note of his violin. "Most people can't."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Ask me again," he replies, "*another time.*"

Another time. As if there will be another time, and I suppose there could be, considering the VIP auction that is still weeks away. Weeks too long when Gio is missing.

a reckless note

An announcement sounds over the intercom. "The auction will begin in five minutes. Please take your seats."

"They're calling us," he says. "Why don't I show you the way around?"

No, I think. Yes, I think. Please, I think. "Thank you," I say.

"You're very polite," he teases and motions me forward.

"Shouldn't I be?" I ask, as we fall into step and I realize now that he's tall, well over six feet to my five feet four inches.

"Please has appropriate uses," he says softly, and the look in his eyes is pure suggestion. He is flirting with me. Isn't he?

We've just passed the doors to the cocktail room again when Mark steps into our path and motions to Kace to join him. Kace doesn't fight him this time. His jaw flexes and he glances over at me. "I need to—"

"No problem," I say. "I'm good." I quickly dart away, because the truth is, I'm treading in dark waters with Kace. I need to bid on this wine and get out of here before I walk through the Valley of Death, so to speak. Though I am doubtful that's what any moment with Kace would feel like, and that's the problem.

I'm directed into a room that is set up with a stage and rows of chairs in front of it, and an usher in a tuxedo greets me. He then leads me to an assigned seat which is near the rear of many rows of white foldable chairs, which is a location that I claim with mixed feelings. I need to blend and fade in the crowd, but I also need to win this auction to pay the bills, and for the added security that I get into the VIP event. Hopefully sitting this far back in the room won't impede my bidding. A paddle for just such an action is

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in my seat and I claim it before I sit down. Guests are quickly filling the surrounding seats and the fit is tight. I end up sitting and standing several times to allow guests to pass. One of the times, I turn slightly and end up staring into Kace's blue eyes. He's three seats back to my right, but in this moment, it feels as if he's right in front of me.

"Are you going to sit back down?" The elderly man behind me scowls with this question.

"Sorry," I say quickly and I sit down, my cheeks heating with the embarrassment of standing there, staring at Kace. My God, I just acted like a groupie. It's embarrassing. I'm not a groupie. I've never been a groupie. I will never be a groupie. My ancestor created the Stradivarius. That's a big deal, but maybe that's the point. Kace isn't interested in me. He's interested in that "recipe" as Sofia had called it.

I swallow hard with that brutal thought as a man a few spots in front of me to the right turns and smiles. It's Alexander and he mouths, "Good luck."

I groan in my head. He's in this for the challenge and I have no idea how deep his pockets are, but I suspect a tunnel to hell from my perspective.

Crystal walks to the stage and steps behind a podium, speaking into a microphone. "Welcome everyone," she greets, before relaying a few rules and processes and then says, "We're going to bring our expert auctioneers up to get this event started."

And so the auction begins.

Item after item is auctioned off. The wine is more than halfway through the event and my nerves are jumping all over the place when the bidding begins at one hundred and fifty thousand. Alexander bids first. I lift my paddle and bid. Another man bids. We repeat. The "other" man falls out at three hundred thousand.

a reckless note

Alexander bids three-fifty and eyes me over his shoulder.

I bid three-sixty. He goes three-seventy-five. My chest is tight. I need this win. I bid again. Three-eighty-five. He bids four hundred and that's it. I'm out. A blade of despair guts me. Alexander turns to gloat. I want to throw my paddle at him. I inhale and exhale, trying to calm my emotions. I want to get up but no one has gotten up. I need to impress Mark. That's all I have left, my only way to get to that violin for an early viewing. And so I wait and wait until the crowd disperses. When I'm on my feet, I squeeze through the bodies and hurry out of the room, but not the building. As much as I want out of the here now, I am going to have to wait for a car service and I need to use the ladies' room.

I follow the signs and once I'm inside one of the many stalls, voices echoing around me, I grab the wall. My brother's gone. I have no money. I have to make this work. I'll find another bottle of wine for my client and get a commission to pay the bills. I'll talk to Crystal. Maybe she has another prize for my client. That's what I'll do. Still, I can feel the eruption inside me that wants to happen. I need out of here before I fall apart. I quickly do what I came in here to do, wash up, and manage to smile at two women also at the sink.

When I walk to the door, I steel my spine. I could run into Mark or Crystal. I need to stay focused. I need to stay strong. I'm here to find Gio. I exit to the hallway and make it to the lobby without impediment, but there stands Alexander with Mark. I draw a breath and walk right up to them both. "Congrats, Alexander," I say and then to Mark. "My client capped me at four hundred. My hands were tied. It's undrinkable or I might have gotten him higher. He actually prefers to sample the old vintages."

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Mark's eyes assess me, and I swear the man could move a mountain with the force of his steely gray stare. "You put up a good fight. Maybe next time." He then nods at us both. "Goodnight." And then walks away. Hope flutters inside me like a pair of butterfly wings afraid to fully take flight. I think he just told me that I'm invited to the VIP event where Sofia is certain to be as well.

"Why don't I make it up to you with a nightcap?" Alexander offers.

"No thank you. I'm not a big drinker. And I have to talk to my client."

"Then how about dinner tomorrow night?"

"I'm going to be hunting another bottle of wine, but thank you. Good night, Alexander." I head for the door, and exit into a crowd of guests hovering around the building, shivering with a colder temperature than expected, wishing I'd brought a coat. I step off to the side of a group of people and I'm about to call an Uber when Kace is suddenly in front of me. He's in a brown jacket made with soft fitted leather, the color contrasting with his blue T-shirt and matching his boots. The entire outfit screams cool. And warm. He's warm. I'm not. I shiver and hug myself. "You're cold." He motions behind him. "I already had my car pulled around. Come. I'll give you a ride."

"No, I—"

He steps closer, the mix of the scent of man and a woody cologne lifting in the air and teasing my nostrils and apparently every other part of my body. I'm so hyperaware of this man it's insane. "Don't say no," he says softly.

He's close, so very close and I want him closer when I should be pushing him away. I tell myself to decline, but he repeats his words. "Don't say no, Aria."

a reckless note

My name on this man's lips undoes me. Maybe he's just being friendly. Maybe this is more. God, it feels like more. Maybe it's a dangerous fire igniting, but I don't seem to care. I can barely find my voice, but somehow I manage and awkward, "I ah – yes. Yes, please."

His eyes twinkle with mischief. "Well, since you said please. I do think that word could grow on me."

My cheeks heat and my lips part with what is surely a suggestive comment and he laughs low and deep, a musical masculine rumble that I feel in every part of me. "You blush easily. Come on. Let's get you in the warm car."

He slides his arm around me and ushers me forward, and the thing is, *I let him.*

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chapter six

What is happening to me?

I'm melting like butter from having this man's arm around me.

I tell myself that my intense reaction to Kace is simply that I haven't been touched in a very long time. And I'm alone right now, so very alone. Gio is gone. My rock is gone. And Kace came into my life at just the right moment to stir a fierce reaction. That's all this is.

To prove this fact to myself, I try to focus on something other than his body warming mine, like his car—a fancy blue sports car, that I'm pretty sure is a Roadster, which I only know because I had a rich classmate in college who drove his father's on occasion. They're outrageously expensive, but then, Kace has money. Of course, he does. He's a Grammy award-winning artist. He tours the world. He has fame, and millions of albums sold. He has women falling at his feet and I don't intend to be one of them.

He clicks his locks and when his arm leaves my shoulders, the absence of his touch is a shock that sends a chill radiating down my spine. He opens the passenger door for me. "You don't have to do this," I say.

He steps closer and Lord help me, I want him even closer. "I *want* to do this," he says softly.

Want.

That word was in my head and now it's on his lips.

I hesitate, but I don't know why. I know that I'm not going to say no and so does he. To play a game of yes or

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no is silly. I climb inside, sinking into the luxury of the car and the leather seat. He surprises me by kneeling beside me. “Where are we going?”

That question jolts me. I don’t live in a neighborhood that suggests I have clients capable of bidding on a ten-million-dollar violin. I rotate to get out of the car, but that’s a mistake because Kace is not eye level. “What just happened?” he asks, and his hands, his musically talented hands, rest on his powerful thighs. I find those hands incredibly alluring.

I’m not only drowning in everything seductive about this man, I’m captive to the façade of money. No, I’m captive to lies. Lies have held me prisoner my entire life, and I just can’t add another. My gaze lifts to his. “I don’t live in Tribeca or Soho, or whatever fancy neighborhood you live in, Kace. I live in the West Village.”

“I happen to love the West Village. It has personality.”

“I should take an Uber.”

He holds out his hand to me. “Nice to meet you. I’m your Uber.”

I laugh in spite of myself and accept his hand, heat darting up my arm and across my chest. “You’re—”

He kisses my hand and steals my breath and words. “I’m what?”

I have no idea what I was going to say and I’m not getting out of this ride. “You’re stubborn, but I’d appreciate the ride.”

His eyes light with approval that I ache for far too much. I’m afraid he’ll see this in my eyes, afraid I’m just reacting to being alone and him sharing a connection to my past that I desperately need right now. I turn and slide back into the seat. He shuts me inside the car and I pull on my seatbelt that feels necessary to navigate my

a reckless note

life right about now. He joins me and settles in. “Where are we going?”

I give him the address and he revs the engine, power purring to a smooth hum. “Is this a Roadster?” I ask.

“It is. You like it?” He pulls us onto the road.

I run my hand over the dash. “It’s a beautiful car. A beast like your violin.”

He laughs. “I’ve never thought of my violin as a beast, but I like that analogy. A beast with a life of its own.”

I want to ask what that means. I’m curious about his training, his practice, his entire life, actually, but I’m sure everyone is. And I don’t dare show just how knowledgeable I am about music anyway. *A reckless note can change everything*, I remind myself.

“You didn’t get the wine,” he says. “That sucks.”

“Yes, it does. Calling my customer and telling him is going to suck all over again, too.”

“Alexander made buttloads in oil and hates to lose. He would have paid another hundred just to win.”

“I could tell that. It was in his eyes. The irony is that my client is old oil money.”

“They’re both crazy,” he says. “A bottle of wine you can’t drink is not my kind of investment, but you know, to each their own.”

“You’d be surprised at some of the requests we get. People have all kinds of quirky interests and when they have money to blow, they will pay to satisfy their interest.”

“And occasionally you get to make a purchase that also interests you,” he assumes. “Like the violin.”

I don’t deny or confirm that statement. “Is it really supposed to be a Stradivarius?”

“That’s what I’m told.”

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“Do you know what source validated its authenticity?” I ask.

“I don’t, but I trust Mark to ensure it’s the real deal. He’s damn good at what he does.”

“And so are many of the counterfeiters.” I’m showing too much knowledge and I change the subject. Or redirect it. “Obviously, you, of all people, have played a Stradivarius.”

He smiles. “Among many other great instruments, but it will always be my instrument of choice. Have you ever played one?”

“I’m not a violinist. That would be you. And perhaps the single most famous violinist ever.”

He glances over at me. “I’m a niche market. The people who know me know that niche market, like you. You knew who I was.”

“You’ve brought people to the instrument. You made violins cool.”

“To many, I defile the instrument and the craft.”

“Because you play pop music and wear denim and leather? That’s ridiculous. They know how well you play. You just stepped out of the box and that makes some people uncomfortable.”

He pulls to a halt at a stoplight. “But not you.”

“I’m envious of your courage.”

He rotates to face me and leans in close, so very close. “Are you now?” he challenges softly.

“I am,” I whisper and I have this insane urge to run my fingers over the stubble on his jaw.

Someone honks and his jaw clenches, as if he regrets the interruption. We both settle back in our seats and it’s only then that I realize I’d turned to face him, that’s we’d turn to face each other. He turns down my street and adrenaline surges through me. I don’t

a reckless note

know how I'm at my apartment with this man. I motion to the front of the building and he parks in front.

"Thank you for the ride."

He kills the engine and gets out. I fumble with my seatbelt and before I've even reached for my door, he's opening it. I rotate to exit and my skirt hikes up my legs, the burn of his stare, hot. I glance up at him and find him staring down at me, something unreadable in his expression. He offers me his hand and it's almost like a question. I'm not sure what that question is, but there is only one answer, this moment, this night. I check that my purse is at my hip and then steel myself for the impact of his touch, before sliding my palm against his palm, sucking in a breath with the charge of that connection.

He pulls me to my feet and close, his woodsy scent once again teasing my nostrils. For just a few beats, I'm on an invisible island with this man, one that floats in an ocean with the stars and moon shining down on us. "I do believe," he says softly, his voice a low rasp I feel in every part of me, "that there's a song in your story."

"No," I say. "I'm not that interesting."

"I disagree." He steps back and takes me with him before releasing me to shut the door. I move more fully onto the sidewalk and then he's beside me, and we're walking to my building. I pull out my key and unlock the door, flipping on the light before I turn to face him. "My apartment is above the store."

He leans closer and presses one hand on the doorjamb above my head. "Aria means melody or song in Hebrew and Italian."

He knows too much. He sees too much but there's no running from what he already sees. "Yes," I confirm. "Yes, it does."

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His gaze lowers to my lips and I swear he's thinking of kissing me. I want him to kiss me like I have not wanted ever before, but then his gaze lifts to mine and he says, "Good night, Aria."

He pushes off the wall and walks to his car. I'm stunned at his abrupt departure and I quickly turn and enter the store, shutting the door, locking up, and turning on the alarm. And then I just lean on the door and stare into the empty space. I don't know what just happened, but I feel more alone than ever. And I didn't even ask him if he knows Sofia.

chapter seven

The building creaks and hums with random noises that I suspect have always been present.

Ed is not happy about the wine, but I promise to find him a new treasure and quickly. I spend a good part of the night searching through my brother's apartment and office for a clue to where he is now. Again. I've done this now three times. I finally decide to try to get into his cellphone account and just have the peace of mind that he's using his phone. An hour later, I can't figure out his password and I know I need to hire a private investigator to dig into this problem safely, but even that makes me nervous. And it's going to cost money.

At nearly two AM, I force myself to lie down in bed and turn out the light, but the darkness and silence overwhelm me. I grab my phone and I can't help myself. I dare to play one of Kace's albums. I can't get him off my mind, but there's a good reason for that I tell myself. His music speaks to my past, to my heart, to my family. And the way he plays Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is just *beautiful*.

I fade into the night, into the sound of his notes, and wake to my cellphone ringing. I jolt with the sound and roll to grab it from the nightstand to find Ed calling. I groan with my tired body and sit up, glancing at the six AM hour. "Morning, Ed."

"Can you reach out to the buyer and offer them four hundred and twenty-five thousand?"

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“I can certainly try, but from what I understand, this guy would have paid five hundred thousand just to win the auction last night. It’s not about money to him. It’s about the game and the power.”

“Try. You have a way about you, Aria. I know you can do this.”

“Don’t do that to me,” I chide. “Don’t build me up to let you down.”

“You can’t let me down. I believe in you, no matter what. But try. That’s all I ask.”

“I will.” We disconnect and I launch myself into action, which means me making coffee, and taking a long hot shower. Riptide is only open a few hours on Saturdays and thankfully I have Nancy, my part-timer who runs our shop during our open hours, coming in today.

Since it’s the weekend, I dress in black slacks, a black blazer over a black silk shell, and my heels I wore last night. I stick a pair of flats in my purse for the subway. After coffee and eggs, I’m ready to go. *Really* ready to go. I need out of the shop, where I’m reminded of all the ways Gio isn’t here. A short subway ride later, I’m at the doors of Riptide and feeling no hesitation, but there is a tiny flutter with the thought of Kace. Could he be here today? Why would he be here today? Why am I even thinking about him being here today? This man is confusing me, stirring fluttery, infatuated feelings I have no business feeling.

The security guard opens the door for me and I shove aside thoughts of Kace and hurry to the front desk where Amber is present again. “Good morning,” she greets. “How was the auction last night?”

“Interesting in all kinds of ways,” I say.

“That it is,” Amber replies. “Always. Intense, too. Do you have an item to pay for?”

a reckless note

“Unfortunately, no. I was a big loser last night. Crystal asked me to stop by. Is she in?”

“She is. Remind me again. Your name—”

“Aria is fine,” I supply.

“Of course. A beautiful name.” She grabs her phone. “Aria is here, Crystal.” She listens a moment and then replies with, “Yes. I will.” She hangs up and smiles. “Follow me. She said to bring you to her office.”

“Fabulous,” I say. “Thank you.”

Amber joins me on this side of the desk and we exit the lobby and travel a long hallway, our path ending at an office door. Amber motions me forward and then heads on her way. I step inside the office and find Crystal behind a large glass desk, her long blonde hair silky around her shoulders, and thankfully her wardrobe confirms my professional instincts. She too is wearing pants. In fact, her outfit is almost identical to mine, except her blouse is pink, not black.

“Welcome, Aria,” she says, popping to her feet and motioning to a small round table. “Let’s sit. I have the paperwork I need from you to get you on the VIP list.” She grabs a file and we both walk to the small round table. My purse is my Louis Vuitton briefcase today and I set it in the chair next to me and between us before claiming a seat across from Crystal.

“I’m sorry you didn’t snag that wine last night,” she says.

“About that,” I reply. “Any chance you could get me in contact with Alexander? I’d gladly pay a commission. My client has now decided he’ll go four twenty-five.” I slide a card in front of her. “You can offer him my cellphone number, if you will?”

“Don’t you love it when they decide after the fact? And of course, I will.” She grabs her phone from her pocket and clearly she knows Alexander personally

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because his number is in her phone. She punches his number and soon she's leaving a message with my number and my purpose in asking to speak to him.

"He'll call," she says, setting her phone aside. "He likes the game in all this."

"Kace warned me, but I have to try."

"Kace." Her lips curve slightly. "He's an interesting one. I'm surprised he told you anything. For a man in the spotlight, he's reserved. He's not big on conversation, or strangers. Except apparently you."

"He didn't seem reserved to me at all," I observe, but immediately question my own statement. He didn't exactly hang around last night for conversation.

"I guess you speak his language," she says. "I do not. I might have to call you to translate with that man. He's actually playing at the VIP event, by the way. And Chris Merit, a world-renowned artist, is painting to his music."

"Chris," I repeat. "Yes. I met him Tuesday, I think."

"Right. Mark told me that, actually. He had lunch with Chris and Kace and you showed up." She laughs. "Very bold of you. I love that you did that."

"I don't think your husband would agree."

She waves that off. "Mark loves when people punch his buttons. Or try. Chris and Kace are fabulous at it, too. Their presence at the event makes it 'the' event of the year for us. Half the proceeds are going to a children's charity Chris supports."

"It sounds spectacular. I'd love to see Chris and Kace together."

She slides the folder to me. "Just fill that out and I'll rush it through for you. Then you will."

"Thank you for doing this, Crystal."

"My pleasure." She smiles a friendly smile. "I hope we'll see you here often."

a reckless note

“As do I,” I reply, and I mean it. This feels right. This place. This new direction for our business. It’s just missing Gio. “One thing, Crystal. Do you mind me asking who authenticated the violin?”

“Of course, I don’t mind. Once you’re cleared for the VIP event, you’ll get a package with all the information for each auction item, including validation and authentication.” Her phone buzzes with a text and she reads it before glancing at me. “I’m going to handle a little problem while you fill out your paperwork.”

“Of course,” I say, and grab the folder as well as the pen she’s set next to it.

The paperwork is fairly basic, but I’m giving her permission to run my security check. Which is fine, I remind myself. My mother made sure my father’s name doesn’t pull up on any of my paperwork. I fill out the documents, I’m just finishing when my cellphone rings with an unknown number.

Nervous every call is about Gio, and not in a good way, my adrenaline spikes and I answer tentatively. “This is Aria.”

“Aria, this is Alexander.” Even his voice radiates arrogance. “You want to talk wine, I hear?”

“I do,” I say, and as much as I hate to invite his flirtations, I know this needs to happen in person. “Can we meet?”

“I tried to make sure I saw you again last night, but you blew me off.”

“And yet here we are talking.”

“Can you meet me at Jerry’s bakery in Tribeca in an hour? If I can’t win you over, their cookies will.”

Tribeca, home of the rich and famous like Kace, but that area is busy and a bakery feels simple and friendly. “I’ll be there.”

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We say a quick goodbye and disconnect just as Crystal returns. “All set?” she asks, walking toward me.

I stand and turn to face her. “I am,” I say, “and thanks to you, Alexander called. I’m going to meet him.” I hand her the file filled with my paperwork. “You don’t happen to know of any other rare wines you might have coming up?”

“I do believe we’ll have one or two ready to be auctioned off in a few weeks. I’ll see what I can find out about them and let you know when I call to officially invite you to the VIP event.”

“Thank you so much, Crystal,” I say, and I’m probably saying thank you too much, but it’s out, it’s done. I just can’t stop myself. I’m very polite, as Kace had readily pointed out. And he’s not wrong. I say thank you. I say please. *Please*. That word reminds me of Kace all over again. *Please has appropriate uses*, he’d said, and just thinking about the raspy, sultry tone of his voice has me swallowing hard.

“We should have lunch,” Crystal suggests, drawing me out of my reverie. “It seems we live in a similar world. Maybe we can help each other out here or there.”

Friends are not a good idea, not in my world, but there’s something about Crystal that is hard to resist. She’s also a great connection to help our business. “I’d love that.”

“Terrific. I’ll call you Monday and we’ll work out all the details for the event and lunch.”

“Perfect. Now, I’m going to go wrestle for that wine.”

She laughs. “Good luck.”

I turn and then hesitate, rotating to face her again. “Is there a Sofia who works here or that you know?”

a reckless note

Her brows furrow. “No. That name is remotely familiar, but no bells are ringing. Why?”

“My brother’s traveling, but he’d gotten a tip from her about the violin. I just wanted to thank her. I thought he said she worked here, but I must have misunderstood. Anyway. Thank you again.”

A few minutes later, I exit to the street, and disappointment jabs at me. No one knows Sofia but Gio. And now he’s missing. What if Sofia isn’t even her real name?

I need to hire a PI and that means I need to buy this wine off Alexander.

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chapter eight

Jerry's Bakery is smack in the most elite part of the rich and famous strip of Tribeca and near the Hudson River. After a packed subway ride, I arrive at the cute little spot, easy to identify by way of its baby blue wooden sign and two matching wooden benches out front. A line of people has formed and extends past the double open doors. I step past the crowd and enter the bakery, walking around the register. The scent of sweet treats is deliciously tempting, while the seating area I bring into view is a cute rainbow of colored wooden tables and chairs.

“Aria.”

I glance to my right and toward the back of the seating area to find Alexander standing just behind an order pick-up counter, motioning for me to join him. To my surprise, he's not perfectly pressed and in a suit today. In fact, not only is he wearing jeans and a T-shirt, but as I close the space between us, I find his thick dark hair in wavy disarray. Somehow it all makes him a little more human and likable. Even more so when I stop in front of him and he announces, “I bought some cookies and a coffee for you, to spare you the line.”

It's a thoughtful gesture and I decide then that perhaps I've been hard on him. “Thank you,” I say ever so politely, shoving aside a memory of Kace. Again. I can't get him out of my mind.

“Of course,” Alexander says, motioning me into action and I follow him around the counter to another

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private seating area of at least another half-dozen filled tables.

We settle into our chairs across from each other and he hands me the coffee he's ordered for me. "It's their house vanilla latte. I hope that works. In hindsight, I should have sent you a text and asked what you liked."

"This is perfect," I say, sipping the sweet, warm beverage. "Thanks for the coffee and for meeting me."

"My second chance," he comments and when I might fidget a bit, I don't get the chance. He moves on. "And I get it. Auction remorse is common. I feel for you. How pissed was your client?"

"He's too nice to be angry and I pushed him for his max right before the auction. He'll go to four hundred and twenty-five thousand today if you'll sell the bottle."

He thrums fingers on the table, his Rolex glinting in the overhead light. "Here's the thing," he says. "I can't sell this bottle."

My spine slowly straightens, the idea that he's playing me setting me on edge. "Can't or won't?"

"Can't. I bought it for a client that does tens of millions with our company. I teased him with it. I promised him I'd get it for him. And he's paying me."

Feelings I try to avoid and dislike—anger and desperation—rip through me. "Why did you bring me out here for this then, Alexander?"

"Because I'd like to be your friend and—"

I stand up.

"Wait," he says. "I have a proposition. Please." He pats the table. "Sit. Hear me out."

I'm torn. I feel played, but I remind myself of my reasons for being here, and they all come back to Gio. I breathe in a calming breath and settle back into my chair across from Alexander.

a reckless note

He studies me a moment. “You really don’t want to like me, do you?”

“It’s not that—”

“Then what is it?”

It’s a complicated question. He’s a good-looking man. He’s wealthy. Most women would be flattered by his attention but I know my problem with him. Powerful men, collectors of rare items at that, stir unease in me. He reminds me of the powerful men my mother said my father did business with before he disappeared. But the truth is, I’m not being fair. I judged him before he ever opened his mouth.

“I’m sorry. I’m on edge over this client. And I’m confused about what we’re doing here.”

“I’m trying to help. I really am. I have a large rare wine collection. I’m willing to part with a bottle to make this up to you. You can come over and see what catches your fancy and we’ll negotiate.”

Unbidden, suspicion spins round and round in my mind all over again. “Why would you do that? You don’t even know me.”

“But I want to know you. And I find it’s good to make friends. I help you. You help me one day.”

A violin screeches a wrong note in my mind. “I don’t like owing favors. And I don’t know you.”

He leans closer. “I want to know you, Aria. Come on. Give me the chance. Don’t let this wine get in the way. I had a job to do last night. So did you.”

“You’re right. You did and that’s why you don’t owe me this. It’s fine.”

His cellphone buzzes and he grabs it, reads the message, and presses his lips together. “I’m meeting that client to give him his bottle. You *won’t* owe me. I’ll text you a list of some bottles I’ll consider letting go for the right price. Call me when you look it over. We’ll

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make this work.” He stands up, grabs the cookies, and just that quickly, he’s gone.

I blink, confused. I don’t know why I’m being so hard on Alexander. He’s trying to help. Or not. I don’t know. Kace is just as rich and powerful, also a collector, and of violins, of all things, and he doesn’t stir unease in me the way Alexander does. Which, in truth, probably makes him more dangerous than Alexander.

I stand up. I can’t sit here in Tribeca. I need to be at home, trying to figure out how to make money to hire that private detective. I walk to the trashcan, toss my coffee, and head for the door. I didn’t even get a cookie, but I’m not standing in that line today. I pass through the seating area and exit to the sidewalk, cutting right to run smack into a hard body. The man catches my arms and I twist fingers around his burnt orange T-shirt to try to right my footing.

“I’m sorry. I’m so—” I look up and gasp. “Kace?”

“Aria.” His lips curve and those blue eyes fleck with orange fire to match his shirt. “Small world again.”

His hands are touching me and I’m burning alive. “*How* are you here?”

“I live around the corner, and this is a popular spot in the neighborhood. How are *you* here?”

Suddenly, I realize that I’m clinging to his shirt. “Oh God. Oh ah, sorry.” I release it and it’s all wrinkled. “It’s a mess now.” I run my hand over the wrinkles, which means a whole lot of hard muscle. Oh yes, lots of muscle. And the man looks good in orange, and somehow my eyes are on his snug jeans, tan leather jacket, and biker boots. My gaze jerks to his. “God, what am I doing?” I drop my hands. “I’m sorry, Kace.”

He laughs a low, sultry, masculine laugh. “My shirt will survive.” His hands slide down my arms, lingering until they fall away from my body, and I want him to

a reckless note

touch me again. I cannot believe how badly I want him to touch me again. “So? How *are* you here?” he repeats.

“My client wanted me to offer Alexander four hundred and twenty-five thousand. I met him here.”

“And?”

“And he said he bought it for some client. He offered to let me look at his personal collection to pick a bottle for my client, though.”

His brow shoots up. “Why would he do that?”

“Exactly,” I say. “And I asked him that. He said it’s good to make friends and friends help each other.”

His jaw tenses. He is not pleased with my little encounter and I don’t know why. “What did you say?”

“That I don’t like being in debt to someone I don’t know.”

His expression softens. “Good decision. Be careful with Alexander. Aria, I know him well, too well. We actually live in the same building. He even tipped me off on my place. I tipped him off on this bakery.” His mood shifts, his energy noticeably lighter. “Did you try the iced sugar cookies?”

“No. I had coffee and the line is too long to wait right now.”

“Have a cookie with me.”

Have a cookie with him. I’m instantly all about that cookie, but should I be? He pulls down my walls. He affects me. He confuses me. “I shouldn’t.”

He steps closer, and my God, all that spice and man smells better than the bakery. “You should.”

“Kace—”

He catches my hand and I’m melting right here on the New York sidewalk. “Just a little sweet treat for the road.” He says those words as if I’m the sweet treat and then turns us toward the bakery. And with his hand holding mine, I’m not going anywhere but with him.

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chapter nine

Kace notches up the intimacy of him holding my hand by lacing our fingers together, which is confusing and wonderful and wrong and right. I don't know what I feel right now. *Maybe he's a touchy-feely person*, I think, but quickly discard this idea. Crystal had called him reserved and I sense that in him, but then I of all people understand what's it's like to be friendly, but still guarded.

He leads me past the line to the register where a sixty-something woman with shoulder-length silky all-gray hair and delicate, lovely features, is filling orders. "Hey, Jenny," he says and pulls me closer, intimately closer, my hip at his hip, and when he looks down at me, heat blossoms between us. "You do like sugar cookies, right?"

Somehow the question feels as intimate as how we are now standing. And I don't want to step away. "I love sugar cookies," I confess. "The more icing the better."

"She's a keeper, Kace," Jenny announces, clearly overhearing.

My cheeks heat with the implication that we're on a date. Kace gives me a light nudge under the chin. "There's that blush again. How do you drink your latte? Jenny has every latte flavor you can think of."

"Non-fat white mocha?"

His lips curve, something akin to approval in his eyes I don't understand until he refocuses on Jenny and says, "My normal times two today."

His normal. He drinks white mochas?

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“You run Jerry off today?” he asks Jenny.

“Oh that man,” Jenny grumbles. “He pulled his back taking out the trash. I think he’s faking. He wanted a day off.”

“Us men have bad backs,” Kace argues. “Be easy on him, Jenny.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She grimaces, but somehow even that is delicate, like a flower nudged by the wind. “I’ll think about it. Order coming right up, Kace.” She waves at me and winks.

My cheeks heat all over and Kace gives a low chuckle. “Come on.” He’s still holding my hand when he starts walking, pulling me along with him—no, more like guiding me—through the seating area, and around the counter, to the same exact table I’d shared with Alexander. The table is against the wall, and Kace grabs my bag from me and sets it on the chair that ensures I sit right next to him, not across from him, as I had Alexander. He pulls out that chair and invites me to sit.

For just a moment, I’m frozen there, staring at him, trying to understand what’s happening. What am I doing with this man, and why, despite all my mother’s warnings and my good sense, do I want to keep doing it?

His lips hint at a smile, his eyes with mischief. “Should I tell you what I’m reading into that look you’re giving me right now?”

“No, actually,” I say quickly, pretty sure my look was far more telling than intended. “Don’t.” I sit.

He laughs that low and sultry laugh of his and helps me scoot up to the table. Once I’m settled, he claims the seat next to me. “You want to tell me yourself, then?” he asks.

“No. I don’t believe I will.”

a reckless note

He considers me a moment, those blue eyes seeing a bit too much for my comfort before he lets me off the hook. He shrugs out of his jacket and settles it on the back of his chair. “How upset was your client?”

“Pretty upset, but not at me,” I say. “I called him right before the bidding and confirmed his top price. He did pressure me this morning to right his wrong, but clearly, I never had a chance with Alexander.”

“No. You didn’t. What he says and does is always about positioning and an agenda. Alexander is all about power.” He angles in my direction, all of his attention on me. “Every move he makes is about control and power.”

“But your moves aren’t?”

“I’m many things, but I don’t resemble Alexander in any way.” It’s not exactly a direct answer, I realize, but before I can push him, he adds, “If you haven’t figured that out yet, you will.”

The comment takes me off guard. It suggests that he’s offering me the opportunity to find out, to know him, and my head swims with the right and wrong of what’s happening between me and this man, and something is happening. And so, at least for now, I dare to accept. “It seems you’re a regular here.”

“I’ve been coming in here since I was a kid with my parents. Jenny and Jerry were good friends with my parents. They’re like second parents to me. They used to reward me with cookies and cupcakes for long hours of practice.”

I give a tiny smile. “No wonder you were able to skip the line.”

“A little perk, yes.”

Jenny appears beside our table and sets our coffees and cookies down. She’s in a long pink dress and I hadn’t realized how petite she is, maybe a whole five

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feet at the most and a hundred pounds soaking wet. "Have you tasted our cookies before, dear?"

"I have not had the pleasure," I say. "But I'm looking forward to it."

"This is Aria, Jenny," Kace introduces me. "She runs a rare collectibles business."

Interest, genuine interest, lights her features. "Oh really. What kind of collectibles?"

"Pretty much anything you might want," I say. "Wine. Books. Ancient objects."

"You must see a lot of interesting pieces of history," she comments. "I love history."

"As do I," I say, "which was a big part of what drew me to this business."

"I'd love to chat about some of the things you've seen. You get Kace to bring you to the house one evening."

Someone calls out, "Jenny! Jerry's on the phone!"

She groans. "Can you find me a new husband? One with a better back?"

I laugh. "I think you should just give him some Advil and keep him."

She scowls. "You are *no* help. Eat the cookies and take care of this one here." She squeezes Kace's shoulder. "He's my boy."

Warmth washes over Kace's expression. He loves this woman and this tiny look into his life is unexpected in all kinds of ways. He's a genius, a prodigal violinist, and yet he's so down to earth, so human. So complicated. I sense that, too. There are many layers to this man, and I'm not sure he really invited me to see them at all. I just don't know what this is between us. I'm not sure what I want to be happening between us.

Jenny hurries away and Kace opens the box of cookies. "Okay. Life is too short for you to never have

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had these cookies.” He displays the goodies. “How does the icing stack up?”

I grin. “Considering they are overflowing with icing, I approve.”

“Dig in, then,” he encourages.

I smile and find myself remarkably comfortable reaching for a big fat cookie, which is surprising considering I’m about to stuff my face in front of perhaps the most interesting man I’ve ever met. “I can’t wait.” I take a bite, and the soft, sweet, yummiest cookie I’ve ever had is an instant delight, while icing smears all over me. I laugh and he hands me a napkin, our fingers brushing with sizzling results, his expression warm now for me, too.

“Well?” he prods.

“Wonderful. Too wonderful. Thank God I don’t live over here. I’d be in trouble.”

His expression is still warm. I’ve pleased him. He likes that I like the cookies, and this pleases me. He snags one for himself and takes a big bite, icing smudging his face now. It’s my turn to hand him a napkin. “Thank you,” he says.

“Ah. You have manners, too.”

“Hmm. I guess I do.” He winks.

My stomach flutters and I’m afraid I’m too transparent in my reactions to this man. I test my coffee and it’s perfect. “Even the white mocha is wonderful.”

“Everything here is.” He finishes off a cookie. “I gather from our first encounter that you’re new to Riptide. Is your business new to the city?”

“We’ve been around for five years,” I say, offering an answer as truthful as possible, “but auction houses take a commission I prefer to avoid. I’m coming around, though. I’m starting to feel like I can make this

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work.” I use this door he’s opened to slide right into the topic I’d missed talking about with him last night. “Do you happen to know a Sofia, Kace?”

His brow furrows. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Why?”

“My brother and I work together and she’s the one who tipped him off about the auction at Riptide, but he’s traveling and not communicating well. I was hoping to pick her brain about the instrument.”

“She doesn’t sound familiar, and as for the instrument, Mark won’t even let me look at the damn thing. Not even after I agreed to do a show with Chris Merit at the VIP event itself. Bastard.”

I laugh. “He does seem like a hard-ass but aside from that obvious statement, I heard about your performance from Crystal today. I’m excited to be there.”

He arches a brow. “So you won over the hard-ass, did you?”

“More like I won over Crystal. Maybe. I’m not sure. I might have won over Mark before Crystal. Either way, I like Crystal quite a lot. Thank you for the tip.”

He inclines his chin ever so slightly, studying me intensely again and I can’t read his thoughts. I want to read his thoughts. “Should I guess what you’re thinking now?” It’s out before I can stop it. Oh God, what was I thinking?

He leans closer. “Are you ready for that?”

Heat rushes up my neck. “I’d better leave it to my imagination.”

“Not mine?”

“No,” I say quickly. “Not yours.”

“All right then,” he agrees, sitting back, his mood turning from sultry to conversational. “You only have one sibling?”

“Yes. One. You?”

a reckless note

“It’s just me.”

Just him.

I cut my gaze, with the bite of fear I cannot escape. It cannot be just me now. It can’t be. Gio has to come home.

“Hey,” he says, softly compelling my attention.

My lashes lift and I look at him, swimming in the deep blue sea of his eyes.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asks. The question surprising me, telling me he sees me, really sees me, when I have spent a lifetime trying to be invisible to everyone but Gio. This awareness between us is both thrilling and terrifying. Gio is gone, but Kace is here. And Kace has a unique connection to a world I’ve lost, and that I crave now more than ever. He brings me home, back to my roots. He makes me feel a little less alone. So maybe I should run far away, run from him, but for once in my life, I defy all I’ve been taught, and I don’t. I stay put, right here with Kace.

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chapter ten

“Aria?”

At Kace’s gentle prod, I’m snapped out of my reverie.

“Did I say something wrong?” he presses.

“No. Of course not. You said nothing wrong.” And he didn’t. He *said* nothing wrong. Gio’s absence is what’s wrong but I can’t talk about that and I don’t. I change the subject quickly. “For some reason,” I say, “I thought you lived in Germany.” It’s out before I can stop it, and without that intent, I’ve just made myself look like a fangirl. “I was reading up on the recent Stradivarius auctions and went down a rabbit hole, which included the great violinists of our time.” The explanation I’ve given him is not a lie. I’ve secretly stayed on top of every auction ever held for a Stradivarius and sampled every one of the great violinists. The truth is that Kace’s playing has lulled me to sleep more than just last night.

If he notices my misspeak, he doesn’t show it. In fact, he leans in a little closer, the masculine scent of him far more delicious than the cookies—and the cookies smell pretty darn amazing. “I have a home here and in Germany. Germany is central to my European tours and while I love Germany, New York is my preferred home. That’s what I was arguing with my agent about when you walked up on me at the auction,” he continues. “He wants me to go on a European tour again at the first of the year.”

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“And you don’t want to go?” I ask, surprised at how much *I* don’t want him to go. Which is silly. I just met him. Of course, he will leave soon. His international market is massive.

“No,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. “I find New York calling me right now. Have you ever been to Germany?”

“I haven’t even been to a German restaurant.”

“You’re kidding me. You’ve never had spaetzle?”

“What is *spaetzle*?”

“German pasta.” His cellphone buzzes with what sounds like an alarm. He snags his phone from his jacket pocket and silences it. “Unfortunately, our talk of spaetzle must wait until later. I have a meeting at Riptide with Mark and Chris. Can I give you a ride home on the way?”

“No,” I say quickly, the idea of putting him out and making him late one I won’t allow. “I’m going to make another stop at this end of the city.” I grab my bag. “I have to swing by my client’s office and talk to him. I really should have been on my way by now. His office is right around the corner.” Which, thankfully, is also not a lie. I do think I’ll stop by and see Ed. An in-person visit will soften the bad news.

He shrugs into his jacket. “I’ll walk you there.”

I don’t know why I suddenly feel awkward when I didn’t a few moments ago. “That’s not necessary.”

“No,” he agrees. “It’s not necessary, not necessary at all. Most things worth doing aren’t. That’s what makes them meaningful.” There’s a bloom of warmth between us, and a message in his words. He chooses to walk with me. He wants to walk with me. And I am far from eager to end this encounter.

“I’d like that,” I say of his offer.

a reckless note

At my reply, there is something that resembles relief in his eyes but that makes no sense. Surely he didn't really think that I'd decline his company? He motions to my cup. "Do you want to take your coffee to go?"

I shake it to find that, having sipped in between our conversation, it's all but gone. "Nothing to take."

He grabs both our cups tosses them into the can just behind him. "Hang tight a minute," he says, grabbing the cookie box and walking around me to the counter, where he speaks to Jenny.

I wait and as I do every empty second I own these days, I grab my phone from my bag and check for messages from Gio, but as is always the case, there's nothing.

Kace heads back my direction and by the time I slide my phone back into my bag, he's in front of me, offering me his hand to help me up. Once again, it feels like a question. One I know I shouldn't answer with yes, and yet, what do I do? I steel myself for the impact of his touch and I press my palm to his. I, in essence, say yes. He eases me to my feet and then we're close again, really close, our hands still joined. He towers over me, staring down at me, and I'm transfixed, drowning into the deep depths of his stare. And yet somehow, as intimate as this moment, I understand what Crystal meant when she described him as reserved. He's here with me, one hundred percent present, and yet he's not. There's more to him, something edgy and dark, something I don't understand, but Lord help me, I want to understand.

"We'd better go," he murmurs softly.

"Yes," I say, feeling an odd sense of regret, when nothing about this encounter should scream regret at all.

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Several people crowd into the seating area, and Kace—reluctantly, it seems—releases my hand. The people just keep coming, and I maneuver forward. Kace is right behind me as I pause at the counter to smile at Jenny. “Thank you, Jenny. I loved everything. It was delicious.”

“Oh good, honey.” She hands me a bag. “Those are for you. Come back.” She points at Kace. “With him.” She waves and hurries to the opposite counter to help a customer.

Oh my god. She didn’t say that. My cheeks are officially hot with her assumptions about me and Kace and I can’t look at him. I hurry forward, and once we’re outside, the chill of the fall day is no match for the heat of my embarrassment over Jenny’s comment. “You don’t have to walk me,” I say again, forcing myself to face him.

His eyes burn with understanding. He knows what she did. He knows what I feel. “We already established that I don’t have to walk with you and that I *want* to walk with you. And I’m pretty sure Jenny is watching expectantly. She wants us to leave together. Let’s do this for her and us. Which way are we headed?”

The man is charming, so very charming. And stubborn. I point to the right. He smiles. “Right it is,” he says, and we fall into step side by side. “Jenny’s really lovely,” I say.

“You have no idea,” he says. “She’s a special lady.”

“I’m surprised the bakery isn’t named Jerry and Jenny’s.”

“He had the place when he met Jenny. He’d lost his wife a few years before and she really brought him back to life.”

No one brought my mother back to life, I think. She was too afraid. Gio wasn’t. He lived. He tried to love,

a reckless note

even if he didn't find that love. I envy him that courage. I think my mother did as well. I just pray it didn't get him in trouble.

A few blocks down, I turn to face Kace, and motion the door of the fancy high-rise where Ed lives. "This is it."

He steps closer, that woodsy wonderful scent of his tingling through me. His gaze lowering to my lips and a swell of heat rushes over me. "This is it, then," he says, his eyes lifting and finding mine, and I swear every nerve ending in my body pulses with awareness for this man.

"This is it," I repeat, regret filling me with the certainty he will be gone any moment.

But that moment is not now. He lingers, his fingers catching a strand of my hair, teasing it an eternal moment, before his hand falls away. "Until next time," he says, and with that, he turns and walks away, leaving me breathless, leaving me confused. Leaving me alone again.

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chapter eleven

Power.

It's all around me.

Ed's home is a den of luxury. The doorman calls up to his place to announce my arrival and it's not long before I'm sitting in Ed's library, rows of books around me, and luxurious leather beneath me, delivering the bad news. "It's just not going to happen, Ed."

Ed's retired, that is true, but he's only forty-eight, fit, in jeans and a polo shirt this Saturday. His dark hair is thick, his jawline chiseled, and his wrinkles more character than age. He's also a man with a calm demeanor, but that calm ticks with an undercurrent of power. "Who was the buyer?"

"Alexander—"

"Voss?"

"Yes, actually. You know him?"

"He worked for me." His lips thin. "I'll handle this, Aria. Thank you for trying. We should do dinner sometime soon. We'll talk about my wish list and other interesting tidbits you and I need to unearth."

Unease flows through me at that wording and for no good reason. After all, this is not an invitation to dinner. It's an invitation to leave. "In the meantime, I'll keep my eyes and ears open." I stand up. His cellphone rings. "I'll see myself out." I turn away and head for the door and he doesn't stop me.

A few minutes later, I step to the street with a nagging sensation in my gut and I don't know why. I've known Ed for a good year now and he's shown no

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interest in anything but wine. Still, his words replay in my mind: *We'll talk about my wish list and other interesting tidbits you and I need to unearth.*

Hunting for buried treasure suits me just fine, as long as the treasure isn't my family secret.



I arrive back at the store close to rush hour, a cold front whistling wind between the high rises. Hurrying into the building with a shiver, I find Nancy packing up to leave. "I thought I was going to miss you again and Joey has a school event tonight." With long dark curly hair, she's a pretty young, twenty-something single mom, always on the run and like me, never dates. She has her schedule and her six-year-old son to think about. I have that reckless note to think about. "I have messages for you and Gio from several customers. Apparently, Gio isn't returning anyone's calls." She sets the messages on the edge of the counter, grabs her bag, and rounds the counter, looking adorable in pleated black slacks paired with a black and white sweater. "I haven't seen Gio in like two weeks. Is he still not back? That must be some treasure he's hunting."

She has no idea. He's disappeared a few days here and there, but never for weeks. "I'm pretty sure the treasure is a woman," I tell her.

"Oh. Well, in all of my two years here, that man has always been a player."

She's right, he is, but no woman would keep him from contacting me. No hunt would keep him from contacting me.

"Whatever the case," she adds, "there are a few customers getting upset."

a reckless note

“I’ll call them. Thank you. And good luck to Joey tonight.”

“Thank you. He’s playing the recorder for the recital. He’s pretty good. I’m hoping he wants to join the band or orchestra. I think it’s character building.”

A topic that is starting to get a little too close to taboo for me, but she’s right. It is. I loved playing the violin as a young girl. I just can’t admit that to anyone, ever. “He’ll be great at whatever he does,” I say instead.

“Thanks, Aria. See you Monday.”

“See you Monday.” I follow her to the door and lock up after her, keying in the alarm.

The minute it’s in place, I rush forward and grab the messages, looking for Sofia, or anyone who might be helpful, but I know all the customers. There’s nothing in those messages that helps. I walk to my small office and set my bag on top of the old wooden desk that takes up almost the entire room. I round the desk and sit down, trying to figure out what to do.

When Mom died, the police were involved, but they knew who killed her. They’d caught it on camera. No one investigated Mom or our family to set off any alerts to the wrong people. Finding a missing person is another story. I set up my MacBook and do some research. The police take a lot of pushing to even help on an adult case such as this one. A PI is a suggested avenue for answers, which I expected.

I’m just going to have to stretch our money and do it. I bring up the bill spreadsheet I keep and decide what to trim and where. I have three thousand I can put down if I skip the mortgage. Another three if I do that again.

I pull up the company bank account just to check my numbers and it’s not good. The figure is half what I’d expected, but now I’m more confused than ever. It’s

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not all gone. Part of it is gone, which tells me that Gio took it, expecting a payoff big enough to make it up. He left by choice. I'm not sure what to do with that information.

He's chasing our past, looking for answers, chasing our father's disappearance, and looking for the formula to create the Stradivarius violin. Clearly, when he told me he'd stopped, he did not and this shouldn't surprise me. He's always wanted to find it, to recreate our family legacy.

Did Gio shut me out because of my disapproval and fear? He might have, but for this long?

Not by choice. I don't believe that for a minute. Not unless he found trouble and he's trying to shield me until it passes, but there's no way he'd leave me without that money. He'll be back before it's due or he'll make a deposit to tell me he's okay.

That's about two weeks from now. I grab the cookies left over from my encounter with Kace today, and nibble on the delicious treats, comfort food, I welcome as I check the date of the VIP auction. It's one day before the mortgage is due. That's too big of a coincidence not to matter. Maybe he's going to be there. No. If he was on the list, Crystal would have told me, unless of course, he's using another name. I don't know how he'd pay for the violin unless he's found a buyer, which might be Sofia or who knows who else. He's up to something, I decide, and it's dangerous enough to believe he might cut me off. And he thought I was too scared to dive into this myself.

Hope fills me. That VIP auction night is *the* night. If Gio is safe, I'll know then.

This is going to be the longest two weeks of my life.

chapter twelve

I don't hear from Ed or Alexander on Sunday.

And considering I really have no idea what trouble brews between them and how it affects what I'm doing, I move on to what I hope will be greener pastures. I spend the day calling clients, creating wishlists for each that I can begin working on. Come midnight, the building creaks with the inhuman sounds of settling but there is nothing else but silence. There was a time when I would lay in my bed and feel the cold emptiness of a life in hiding, of a life with few people I trust, and secretly fill that space with music, with the violin in my headphones.

Tonight, there are no headphones.

I lay on my bed with the letter from Sofia on my chest and Kace's truly stunning version of "Bitter Sweet Symphony" lifting in the air, seducing me to a heavy, drugged near-slumber. Drifting off and away, I land in the not-so-distant past. To a month ago—

Ed Stewart is standing in our store, eager to pick up a bottle of wine Gio had picked up for him in Washington. I hurry into Gio's office to grab the bottle and our receipt book. The wine is an easy find, as is the documentation validating it that Gio has in a folder marked with Ed's name. It's in the safe behind Gio's desk. The receipt book not so easy. His desk is a mess, but that's my brother. All about the treasure, not the paperwork. I sit the wine on the desk and open a drawer only to freeze at the photo of a violin. Panic rushes through me and I grab the stack of papers it

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covers to find obvious research about the known existing Stradivarius violins.

“What are you doing?”

My gaze shoots to the doorway where my brother is now standing, his dark good looks spoiled by the glower on his handsome face.

“What are you doing?” I demand. “We aren’t supposed to go near that world.”

“Said our mother, who was afraid for her children. We’re not children anymore.”

“We’re alive because we listened to her.”

“I’m tired of running. I’m tired of not being able to use the expertise that makes us money.”

“What are you saying?”

“If I can hunt a great violin and get us a payday, I will. If I can claim our family legacy again, then I will. If we have the formula, if we use it and trademark it, then this is over. We’re safe. It’s safe. We can be who we were born to be.”

I round the desk and stand in front of him, chin tilting up to look at him. “Or we can be dead. You can’t hunt the formula. Promise me. I have to go finish up with Ed. Please promise me.”

“I promise you that right now, I’m just doing research, sis.”

“We need to talk about this.”

“And we will, but it’s time to stop hiding in the shadows. It’s time to take what’s ours. It’s time for us to talk about justice for dad. He deserves justice. He deserves more than our fear. Dad wouldn’t want us to hide. That was all mom. I loved her. I miss her, but that’s no way to live.” He pushes off the door and exits back into the hallway.

I gasp and sit up, my fingers curling around my blankets. He didn’t promise anything. His words were

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a word circle, one I let myself get lost in, one I might have let him get lost in. That was six weeks ago. He'd traveled often in those six weeks and every time I'd tried to talk to him again, he'd cut me off. But he got what he wanted. I'm not hiding. I'm all over Riptide, asking questions about that violin, pretending I have a bidder, one that I don't have. He's right, though. Damn it, I'm tired of hiding. I want a way out of this. I want our lives back. And I want him back. If he's not at the VIP auction, I need to hire help, which means I need money.

Motivated now, I throw away the blankets, blinking into the sunlight of a new day that I'm only just now recognizing, the sound of Kace's music still playing on my phone. I crank up the volume. That music is my heritage. I want to be able to crank it up any time I like, which means I do have to fight.

I head to the shower, and I hum that music under a hot stream of water. Later, when my hair is a silky brown and my makeup is done in pale pinks, I dress for a Monday with the hope that Crystal will call—a black skirt, Coach boots, and a black V-neck sweater.

When Nancy arrives at ten, I'm already downstairs in my office making calls, trying to find a new bottle of wine for Ed. She pokes her head in the door. "I'm so sorry. My little one is sick. He apparently started throwing up the minute I left him this morning."

"No problem. Take off." And then because I'm worried about her safety, I say. "Take off the rest of the week with pay."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

Her brows pucker. "But—why?"

"Because family matters. *Go*. Head out. Lock up behind you."

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“Thank you. I—just thank you, Aria, for always being so kind.” She disappears and I hang onto those words “so kind.” I want to be seen as kind, but what else am I? What have I let myself become beyond a shadow of all my hopes and dreams? Hopes and dreams I don’t even remember now.

Shaking off those thoughts, I focus on my goal: money to hire a PI.

I get to work.

Hours later, I have a few leads on bottles Ed might want, but nothing high-dollar enough to achieve the financial support I need. I’m about to start working on another project for a different client when Crystal calls. “Hey, you. I got your security reports back. You are officially all clear. Want to stop by right after closing and pick up your action package?”

“Yes, I’m eager, What time?”

“Six-thirty?” she suggests. “Is that too late?”

“No. Perfect. See you then.”

We disconnect and hope fills me. Riptide is where I need to be, it’s where I’ll find my answers and my brother. I feel it in my bones.



It’s a chilly evening with temperatures in the forties when I arrive at Riptide’s door. On this evening, I’m bundled up in a black thrift store Coach trench coat. Apparently, someone had decided Coach was beneath them and thank God for it because this coat was a steal and it’s darn sure not beneath me.

The guard opens the door for me and kindly takes said coat to hang it up. I’ve just handed it off when Crystal, dressed in a black sweater dress, rushes in my direction. “Mark headed to a meeting with Chris for a

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charity project and he forgot a document that he needs. He's swinging around to the curb to grab it. Give me five. You know where my office is, right? Or if you like coffee, the breakroom is right by the room we were in for the auction the other night. I just made a fresh pot."

"I'd love some coffee," I say, "and feel no pressure. I'm in no rush."

"Thank you, Aria." She squeezes my arm and grabs her coat before heading outside.

I walk to the auction area Crystal directed me toward and easily find the breakroom. I've just stepped inside when the sound of a few violin notes fills the air. I freeze with the certainty that Kace is here, perhaps lingering from a rehearsal with Chris. He begins to play "Carmina Burana," which is a famous composition most people have heard but don't know by name. It's brilliant, intense, emotional. My father loved it and just hearing it tightens my chest. The connection to my past is too intense to ignore.

I follow the hot and cold notes of a perfectly played violin and enter the auction room to find him standing on stage. Dressed in black jeans, a black T-shirt, boots, and a black beanie, he is every bit his rock star image, but it's not his physical looks that make him a star. I stand there in the doorway and watch the way his face dances with emotion as he plays, the way his hands control his instrument to match those emotions.

The chairs are gone now, and I can't help myself. Daringly, I walk to the center of the empty room, smack in the middle, and watch him play, savoring the dramatic way he drives every note, the expression on his handsome face that says he feels every note. And I feel them with him. I feel them right down to my very soul where the violin still lives, where my father still lives, where my mother now lives with him. My lashes

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lower and I can see myself standing in his shop back in Italy, laughing as he blasted this song and pretended to play it on an invisible violin. My mother is there, too, and it's her he plays for, her he dances around for. Her he kisses, when he lowers that imaginary instrument.

The song ends in a swell of emotion for me and I struggle to regain my composure. Slowly, my lashes lift and to my shock, Kace is standing in front of me. I blink into his intense, probing stare, stunned at how close he is to me, a sway from our bodies aligning. "What does it mean to you?" he asks.

"You are so very gifted, Kace. The way you feel every note is mesmerizing and contagious."

He reaches up and strokes the dampness from my cheeks, and that song, his song, is a sultry, alluring drug I can't begin to explain. I'm weak for this man and the memories his song has stirred. "This isn't about me," he says. "It's about you. About what the sound of a violin means to you."

He's both right and wrong. He's a messenger, the gifted artist that returned me to the past, to my father, to the father we as a family deserted, and in that, this is about him. It's also about me and my decisions. Gio was right. Our father, our family, deserves more than our fear.

"Aria," Kace prods softly.

I refocus on him, on this moment, not the many that have passed me by, moments that perhaps I should never have let pass me by. "You took me on a journey, Kace. It was a journey I needed to take. So thank you. I can't be the first to say that to you."

"And yet yours is the only one I want to understand."

"Why? Mine is just another story."

"No," he replies. "It's not that simple."

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I could read into that statement and see an enemy, see the danger, and before today, I would have. I'm exhausted by the fight or flight reaction that is my every moment. My every moment before this moment. Right here, right now, standing with Kace, I refuse to create feelings he doesn't stir in me naturally.

But he knows I know music. He knows my powerful connection to the violin. I feel that shared joy swell between us. And in music, the connection I have felt to this man from the moment we met is too present to ignore—the air thickens with it, pulses with it, the pull between us heavy and hard. I can almost feel us leaning into each other without ever moving. But then footsteps sound, high heels clacking on tile, and the moment is gone. I take a step back, but Kace does not.

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chapter thirteen

Kace and I stand there staring at each other, a pulse, much like a drawn-out musical note holding us there, almost spellbound.

“Aria?”

At Crystal’s voice, I turn to face her. “Hi,” I say, trying not to sound breathless, but I’m pretty sure I fail. “Ready?” I ask.

“I am.” She glances between me and Kace, a curious look on her heart-shaped face. “Are you?”

“Yes. Of course,” I say, but Kace hasn’t moved and I can feel the pull of his presence that I cannot ignore.

Aware of Crystal watching us, of her interest in whatever this is between us, I still dare to glance back at him, to meet his deep blue stare, which—Lord help me—sends a rush of heat low in my belly. “Thank you for allowing me to enjoy your music.”

His lips part slightly as if he might say something, but instead he gives a tiny bow of his head, which effectively blocks his expression. I want to see his expression, to read him, to understand what is happening between me and this man, but it’s too late. He’s already turned away, walking toward the stage, his broad shoulders squared.

Disappointed, I turn away too and close the space between me and Crystal. She backs up to allow me to exit with her into the hallway, where we fall into step together. “Okay, wow. The air literally crackled between you two. *What was that?*”

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Her reaction confirms that I'm not losing my mind. There is something going on between me and Kace. Or I think there is. As with every encounter with that man, I'm walking away with no idea if I will ever see him again.

"Aria?" she prods.

"I heard him playing and the song took me on a walk down memory lane, something old and familiar. I couldn't resist going to watch him perform." I give an awkward laugh. "His rendition made me cry. He's just so good, you know?"

"I do know," she says, "but that, whatever that was, that I just walked in on—well, that was interesting." She spares me a proper reply I don't have, pausing at her office door. "Kace and I are meeting Chris, his wife Sara, and Mark for drinks at the bar next door in about an hour. Why don't you and I head over there and go over the paperwork and just chat?"

"I'd like that," I say, and the idea that I will soon encounter Kace again is a bit too thrilling for my own good. He's too close to my world and my family history for comfort, but when I'm with him, I don't seem to care.



Fifteen minutes later, I'm sitting across from Crystal in a dimly lit, cozy little spot, with what seems like hundreds of dangling red bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and cushy red booths for seating. "They have the best s'mores martinis," Crystal announces. "You have to try one."

I hold up a hand. "I'm not a good drinker. I'll embarrass myself. Who knows what I'll say with a martini down me."

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“Perfect. I want to hear all about you and Kace.” She motions to a waitress. “Two of my usual, Claire, please,” she calls out and then refocuses on me. “I’m a regular here, as you can imagine. It’s close but it’s also wonderful.”

“It’s cozy.”

“Exactly,” she agrees. “That’s one of the things I love about it and it’s never overly packed. Here in the city, that can be hard to find.”

My phone buzzes with a text and I can’t help it. My nerves jolt with the idea that this could be Gio. Or not. It could be bad news. I grab my phone and breathe out in relief and disappointment to find the message is from Alexander and it reads: *Let’s talk about the wine. Can we meet tonight?*

“Everything okay?” Crystal asks, real concern in her voice.

“Sorry,” I say, sighing. “It’s Alexander. Apparently, he and my client know each other. It’s gotten complicated. He wants to meet tonight.”

“Tell him to come here. He knows where it’s at. The Red Bar.”

I hesitate. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. You have to take care of business.”

The waitress delivers our drinks, which look more like dessert, with chocolate drizzles and fancy glasses. I text Alexander the location and scoop chocolate from the rim of the glass onto my finger. “This looks like a perfect formula for drinking too much for my own good because it tastes too good.”

“Well, there is that, but never fear. I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

It’s something a true friend would say. Something it feels like we might become if I let us, but is that selfish? Do I put her at risk because of who I am? My phone

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buzzes again and I glance down and back up. “He’s on his way. Thank you, Crystal.”

She waves that off. “What are friends for if not to help you maneuver the Alexanders of the world? And I feel like we’re going to be fast friends.” She motions to my drink. “Now. Try the martini. I’m dying to see what you think.”

I pick up the glass and smile. “I don’t even have to taste it to know it’s good.” But I do. I sip and the sweet perfect liquid teases my tongue and hides the alcohol. “It’s dangerously good,” I say. “I’ll be drunk and not even know it.”

“That’s the joy of New York City.” She grins. “We are never behind the wheel. We hire a car or hop on the subway.”

I laugh and take another sip and good grief I can already feel the alcohol, a wave of loopiness threatening to take hold. As if she reads that moment, Crystal says, “So, what’s the story with you and Kace?”

“Right to the point,” I laugh.

She sips from her glass. “Is there any other way?”

“No, actually, I love your directness but there is no story. We just keep running into each other.”

He arches a brow. “And?”

“And nothing.” Now I sip from my glass, a generous sip, at that. I’m clearly going to need all the help I can get to continue this conversation.

Crystal sets her glass aside. “*That*, whatever that was I just witnessed between you two, was *not* nothing. I’ve known that man for years. I told you. He’s reserved. That was not Kace August being reserved.”

“I don’t think he’s as reserved as you might think he is with fans.”

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“If that’s the route we’re taking, I’m a vocal fan as well, but he doesn’t look at me like he was just looking at you.”

“I don’t even know what you mean.”

“He gave you bedroom eyes. I mean, I was melting right there in the same room with you two.”

I open my mouth and shut it again. I don’t even know what to say. He’s hot and then cold. He’s touching me and then he’s just gone. “I think you’re reading more into whatever you think you saw, than is real.”

“I’m not, I’m absolutely not, but I’ll let it go.” She grabs a file and sets it on the table. “This is your VIP package. You have expanded details on each item, including the violin.”

“Who did the validation?”

“Ruth Othman. Do you know her?”

“I do,” I say and my lips thin with good reason. I’ve spent years of my life secretly learning from my father’s diaries and drawing. I know a true Stradivarius violin. I’ve studied Othman’s work and while she, and many others, believe in her accuracy, I, as a member of the Stradivari family, know better. She’s often wrong.

“Is it possible for me to get a look at the violin before the auction?” I ask.

“There’s quite a collection of photos in the folder and we’ll allow everyone bidding a closer look on the evening of the auction.”

“Not until the night of the auction?”

“It’s a long-standing rule when we’re dealing with high-value items at risk for damage or theft. And this seller has specific rules he expects us to follow.”

“Who’s the seller?”

“He wishes to remain anonymous to protect the remainder of his collection.”

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Sofia, I think. Could it be Sofia? No. That makes no sense but this whole situation feels off in some obvious way I'm missing, but not as it relates to Crystal herself, which is why I let it go. For now. "Do I need to fill out anything else?"

"You're all done," she says.

"Wonderful." I slide the folder into my bag and then sip my martini. "How long have you been at Riptide?"

"Seven years. It's really a second home. Mark's mother ran the auction house and I was her right hand until Mark joined the company."

"And it was love at first sight?"

She snorts. "Oh what a story that is. I don't know you well enough yet to tell it."

"Now you're killing me with curiosity." We talk and laugh a bit about Mark's asshole persona, but it doesn't last long before she comes full circle. "Back to Kace," she says.

I shake my head and laugh. "Really?" I take another long drink. "Why Kace?"

"Because I saw how *you* looked at him, too."

I wave that off. "Please. I'm in awe of the man's talent." I settle my chin on my hand. "His music is magical." My mind slips back to the stage and me in the center of the room while he played, my lashes lowering as I hear the violin in my head. "Kace is just—" A tingling sensation slides over me and I glance up to find Kace standing over us, but his eyes aren't on *us*, they're on me.

He arches a brow. "I'm just what, Aria?"

I'm so busted. I grab my glass and down my drink. Crystal bursts out in giggles. "I need to run to the ladies' room." She stands up and catches Kace's arm to murmur something to him that I'm not privy to before walking away. Kace slides into the booth across from

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me and flags down the waitress. “Whiskey sour,” he says and motions to my glass. “Another?”

“God no,” I say. “I can barely feel my face right now.”

He laughs and so does the waitress before she walks away. “I’m not staying or intruding,” I quickly say. “I’m about to leave.”

“Don’t,” he says.

“Don’t?”

“Don’t leave.”

It’s exactly what he’d said to me at the bakery and as I sit here, drowning in his stare, I’m not even close to leaving. He leans forward. “What did the song mean to you?”

The alcohol has loosened my tongue and my answer comes quickly with no reserve. “Life. Death. Passion. Pleasure. Happiness. Sadness. Loss.”

His eyes flicker and burn with what I don’t expect, but after listening to him play, should have expected: understanding. “Then I was right,” he declares. “It was personal.”

I forget the denial that will get me nowhere anyway. “Very,” I say simply.

“Your reaction wasn’t about me at all,” he repeats. “I like that.”

My brows furrow. “Why?”

“Because it was about the music, just the music. Because your reaction was raw and real. That’s not easy to find.”

I lean in closer, and dare to speak what I feel. “Every time you play, it’s raw and real, Kace August.”

“And that matters to me coming from you because I know you mean it. And because I can tell that you truly love the violin. Do you play?”

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“Not since I was a small child,” I confess when I would never admit this to anyone else, but he’s Kace August, and the world around him sees him, not me. And at least tonight, with a little drink down me, that idea is liberating, it’s freedom I embrace.

“Do you *want* to play?”

“As a child, but now, like millions of other people, I’d rather listen to you play.”

“I’m not thinking about millions of other people,” he says, his voice low, almost seductive. “I’m thinking of you. I’m right here with you.”

Until he’s not again, I think. “And that,” I say, “is exactly how you make everyone feel when you play.”

“I’m more interested in how I make *you* feel. Now. Right now.”

Heat spikes in the air, sizzling between us and that confusion he stirs in me sears me right along with the heat in his stare. Heat I can no longer dismiss as mine alone. It’s here. It’s real. It’s—

“Aria.”

At the sound of Alexander’s voice, I cringe at the timing, and Kace’s gaze jerks up and left. I follow his lead to find Alexander towering over me, dressed in an expensive three-piece suit and wearing a look of expectancy. “Can we have that talk?” he asks.

The air cuts and bleeds with Kace’s energy and when I look at him, his expression is closed, unreadable.

Crystal picks that moment to return as if she’d seen the disaster in the making, and dove right in to save the day. Kace stands up to allow her to access the booth and when he does, he steps into Alexander and speaks, his voice low, for Alexander’s ears only.

I push to my feet and when Kace turns, he’s between me and Alexander, his lashes half veiled, his jaw hard.

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There is something between him and Alexander, something that isn't even close to good. I open my mouth to speak and then press my lips together. I can't assume this reaction has anything to do with me. Kace and I are not dating. We barely know each other. In fact, he hasn't even asked for my phone number.

I turn away from him and grab my purse, glancing at Crystal. "Thanks for the drinks and everything."

"I'll call you tomorrow," she promises.

"Sounds good," I murmur, and Kace sits back down, effectively clearing my path to Alexander.

As silly as it may seem, it feels like a reminder that it's always about the moment with Kace, *only* the moment. And another moment is over.

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chapter fourteen

I follow Alexander to a small table still in view of Kace and Crystal, where we sit down. “Can I buy you a drink?” he asks.

“No, thank you,” I say. “I’ve had my share. I’d rather talk about wine than drink it or anything else right now.” I glance left as Mark and a several others join Crystal and Kace.

“He’s not what he seems,” Alexander says, obviously catching my quick look in that direction or maybe it’s more about whatever Kace said to him.

“And neither are you,” I rebut, not about to start dissecting people for being something they don’t seem when I’m not what I seem, either. “Ed says you know him.”

“I do,” he agrees, and when the waitress joins us, he pauses to order a whiskey before glancing at me. “You sure you don’t want anything?”

“Not if you want to actually talk, but again, thank you.”

He nods and even before the waitress leaves us alone again, his gaze lands heavily on me. “I want something from Ed. We have a deep history. You’re caught in the crossfire.”

This, I know immediately, is bad news for me and my sale. I already see it coming. “We aren’t getting that wine Ed wants, are we?”

“No, but I came with a peace offering.” He reaches into his jacket and hands me a notecard. “Bottles I

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want. I'll pay you five percent more than he does in commission."

Suspicion flares hard and fast. "Why?"

"Because I'm not the asshole you think I am. Because I know this is how you make your living and I sincerely feel bad that you're stuck in the crossfire."

I'm not that easily sold and I make sure he knows. "In exchange for what?"

"Nothing at all. Do I want to take you to dinner? Yes. But this deal is not contingent on you saying yes, now or ever. I like my wines. You're obviously resourceful. This is quid pro quo in a strictly business sense. What do you say?"

I grab the list and scan the bottles he's listed. It's a big list and while I don't know many of the bottles by name, I have no doubt they're all high-dollar.

"I'm not the bad guy here," he adds. "I'm not. Ed—" he cuts his stare and then glances back at me, "it's personal. Really, deeply personal between he and I."

There's a cut of emotion—of loss, I think—in his stare and with it, a shift in how I feel about this man. I don't ask for details. I long ago learned that when I ask intimate questions of someone, they then ask intimate questions of me. "And you think buying the wines before he does beats him?"

"No. No, I don't." He doesn't offer more, but he doesn't have to. I get it.

"It's part of a bigger plan," I say.

"Possibly," he replies noncommittally.

I glance down at the list again and back up at him. "You want me to work for you so I won't work for him?"

"I'm not asking you to drop him as a customer."

"But you'll outbid him."

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“All’s fair in love and war, but I’m not big on innocent victims. I want you to make the money back he promised you.”

Maybe he means that. Maybe he doesn’t. I don’t know. What I do know is that I recognize in him something I should have recognized in Gio six weeks back: a hunger for revenge. I’m just not sure why that flared in my brother now, after all this time. *Sofia*, I think. This has something to do with Sofia. “Do you know a Sofia?”

“Sofia? No. Should I? Who is she?”

“Someone my brother mentioned having a lot of hot tips for hard-to-find items.” It’s my turn to offer nothing more. I return to his request. My first inclination is to decline his offer, but I also need money to find my brother. I indicate his list in my hand. “I’ll think about it.” And with that, I stand up and grab my purse.

I glance at the table where Crystal and Mark sit in deep conversation with Kace. Chris is there, too, with a pretty brunette by his side. His wife, of course, and even if Crystal hadn’t told me his wife was coming tonight, I’d know that’s who she was instantly. His arm is around her and he nuzzles her neck. She cups his face and there is this connection between them I can’t explain, a deep burning bond. My chest tightens with the idea that I’ve never allowed myself the chance to experience that kind of bond.

Kace’s gaze suddenly shifts and lands on me, and I swear there is a punch between us, an awareness that defies every lost moment. Alexander steps to my side. “Can I give you a ride home?”

I rotate away from Kace to Alexander. “No thanks. I’ve got it covered.”

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“Well then, I’ll just go say hello to Mark.” He winks. “And Kace.”

I’m not sure what that’s all about, but I don’t stay to find out. I walk toward the door, punch in a call for an Uber that’s only two minutes away, even as the hostess grabs my coat for me. Bundled up, I step into a chilly night that reminds me that the holidays are coming and I can’t live through them without Gio.

My car is already pulling up to the curb and I chide myself for the hollow feeling of another encounter with Kace that ends just like this, with me on my own, and no promise of more. I have no business being involved with that man. None. Zero. I hurry toward the black sedan and I’ve just opened the door when I hear, “Aria!”

At the sound of Kace’s voice, my heart leaps, and my belly burns. I turn to find him running toward me, and now my heart is fluttering rapidly. It’s cold and he’s didn’t bother with his coat, his thin T-shirt, no match for the chill. This tells me that he ran after me. He didn’t let me go. *He didn’t let me go.* I lean in and speak to the driver. “Give me a minute. I’ll add an extra tip.”

He nods and I turn as Kace steps in front of me, his hand settling on the top of the door, successfully caging me between his big body and the car.

“I thought you’d come back by the table,” he says.

“I didn’t want to intrude.”

“Alexander is intruding. You wouldn’t have. And—about Alexander.”

That statement is a stab of reality. He’s not here for me. He’s here because of some battle between the two of them. “What about him?”

“He’s got an agenda.”

I bristle, embarrassment heating my cheeks. I actually thought he came out here for me. And I don’t

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understand this man or what game he's playing. "What about you, Kace? Do you have an agenda?"

His eyes darken, burn, heat. His gaze lowers to my mouth and lingers before it lifts. "Yes. I do." And before I know his intent, he's stepped into me, tangling fingers into my hair and leaning in close, his breath a warm fan on my lips and cheek. "This," he murmurs. "I've wanted to do this every damn second I've been with you."

Instantly I'm melting like chocolate under the hot sun for this man and doing it in the middle of a cold October wind. I sink into him, his hard body absorbing mine. And then he's kissing me, his tongue licking against my tongue, a delicious caress that tastes of passion and hunger. His hand slides up my back, molding me closer, possession in that touch that should scare me, but it doesn't. I'm lost in the intensity of my need for this man, a stranger I should resist, but I can't remember why. Why was I supposed to resist?

A horn honks, and Kace pulls back. "You are my only agenda," he says. "Don't forget that." And then he's setting me away from him, leaving me cold where I was hot only moments before. "Good night, Aria." He turns and walks away, leaving me panting and stunned.

What just happened?

"You coming, miss?" the driver calls out.

"Yes," I say. "Yes. I'm coming." I climb in the car and shut myself inside.

I'm still loose-limbed and melting for Kace, and yet, he's gone. He still didn't even ask for my number. He didn't try to see me again. I don't understand. I touch my swollen lips and replay his words. *You are my only agenda. Don't forget that.*

I don't know what that means, but next time, I *will* resist.

If there's even a next time.

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chapter fifteen

I arrive at my apartment and our store in the midst of a quiet, cold night and a tingling sensation on the back of my neck that has me quickly sealing myself inside. Once the security system is in place, I rest with my back against the door and stare into the shop, absorbing the utter silence, oddly void of the normal creaks and moans of the old building. It's too quiet and I find myself rejecting the cold, empty space.

I touch my lips again, the taste of Kace August lingering there, heating the chill in my body and momentarily distracting me from the emptiness of the building, of the night. Part of me welcomes his push into my mind, into my life. The other part is all guilt and torment. Gio is what matters right now, not some rock star violinist who kisses me and leaves again.

"Gio!" I call out and hold my breath, waiting for a response that doesn't come, except for that of my gut telling me that he's gone, that he's not coming back.

I vehemently reject that idea and push off of the door, calling out, "Gio!" as I run through the store. "Gio!" I reach the bottom of the stairs. "Gio!"

On some level, I know that I'm acting crazy, but I don't care. I'm cracking outside and in, cracking and bleeding. "Gio!"

Driven by fear and adrenaline, I run up the stairs and pound on his apartment door to receive no reply. I lean against the wooden surface and slide down the hard surface to the ground, my briefcase falling to the floor with me. The folder Crystal gave me falls out. I

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reach for it, that violin Riptide is auctioning off my only hope of finding answers right now. I shrug out of my coat and let it fall to the floor.

On my haunches, I flip through the folder and find the photos, scanning each with frustration. The photo I would need to validate it as real doesn't exist. Somehow, someday, I have to convince Mark Compton to let me see that violin early without telling him I'm part of the Stradivari family and without alerting anyone else to that fact.



I'm up at dawn the next morning with every intention of stopping by Riptide and making my case to Crystal for an early viewing of the violin. By eight I'm dressed in black slacks, a turtleneck, and blazer, with my red-bottomed black heels. By eight-thirty I'm at the coffee shop across the street from Riptide when I call Crystal.

"Morning," she greets. "How'd it go with Alexander?"

"Weird. Can I come by and bring you coffee? I'm right down the road."

"You will be an absolute goddess if you bring me coffee. I had to come in early this morning."

Relief washes over me. I have my opportunity. And I like her. A friendly face is welcomed right about now. "What's your drink?"

"Skinny vanilla latte."

"And Mark's?"

"He's in a meeting. And he's cut off today. He's had three cups this morning. Believe me, for Mark, that's enough."

"I don't think I want to know what that means."

a reckless note

“Exactly,” she agrees.

I laugh, and it’s genuine. There is just something kismet about this new friendship. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

And I am. Exactly fifteen minutes later, I’ve handed off my coat, checked in with Amber at the front desk, and I’m on my way past the receptionist’s desk to Crystal’s office when Kace appears directly in my path. And Lord help me, the man makes black denim and the black leather jacket he’s wearing look like sex walking and walking right for me.

I don’t know what it is about this man, but I’m weak in the knees and my heart is all fluttery. I’ve known good looking and powerful men through my work, but none have affected me like Kace August, who is rapidly approaching. In another two steps, he’s standing in front of me, Mr. Blue Eyes who smells like spice and man in a warm, delicious way.

“Small world yet again,” he says softly.

“I’m not stalking you,” I joke and that’s another thing about Kace. As much as he affects me, I find an easy comfort with him as well.

He laughs at the comment, all low and sultry. “Well then, I’ll have to try to be more interesting.”

“Please don’t,” I say, the comment out before I can stop it. Apparently, he makes me lose my decorum as well.

His lips—very nice, full lips—curve. “You can explain that comment to me when I get back home. I’m leaving for a concert hop, but I’ll be back the night of the auction.”

Unbidden disappointment stabs at me. “You’re leaving.” It’s not a question. It’s a statement, me trying to digest what he’s just announced.

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“It’s what I do, Aria,” he murmurs softly. “I tour, but I told you. I’m taking a break soon.” He pauses and I swear he looks at my mouth before he meets my stare and adds, “I’ll see you soon.” And then to my shock, he steps closer, his hand finding my waist beneath my blazer. He leans in close, his lips finding my ear as he whispers to me in Italian, “*Mi fai impazzire*,” which translates to *you drive me crazy*. A shiver runs down my spine and when he pulls back, fixing me in that deep blue stare, I’m melting all over again. “See you soon,” he repeats and steps around me to head toward the door.

Breathless now, I will myself not to turn and watch him leave, but I also don’t walk away. I don’t move at all. I’m weak in the knees. I’m warm all over. I’m so hypersensitive to this man that it’s insane. I drive him crazy? He’s driving me crazy. It’s proven by the fact that I’m standing in the center of the lobby of Riptide and I’m not walking. And Lord help me, I’m weak. I turn to watch his departure. It just—happens. He’s at the door now, his back to me, but he doesn’t exit the building. He turns, too, and his gaze lands on me. He lifts a hand and gives me a small wave, and then he leaves. He exits and I really don’t know what just happened. But I’m just standing here holding two cups of coffee, going nowhere.

I force myself to turn back around, to put one foot in front of the other and I arrive at Crystal’s office quickly, where I mentally shake off the encounter before I poke my head around the door and she smiles instantly.

“Morning, sunshine,” she greets, standing and rounding the desk to meet me at the table. “What brings you out this way so early?” she asks, accepting her coffee.

a reckless note

I set my bag in the chair and we both settle into our seats. “Honestly,” I say because honesty feels really good. “To talk to you.”

She wiggles and eyebrow. “About Kace?”

“I’m way too confused about Kace to even begin to talk about him.”

“I was thinking about you saying that’s he’s hot and cold with you.”

As have I, I think, and way too much.

“You have to remember that he’s a public figure,” she continues, “and a lot of people have agendas where he’s concerned. He might be hot, but he burns a cautious slow burn because life has taught him caution is necessary.”

I don’t miss the irony of her words, considering I accused him of having an agenda or the fact that I of all people understand that life lesson and understand it well. “What’s his problem with Alexander?”

“All I know is that they both go way back. Actually, they all do, Mark included, and long before I was around. How did it go with Alexander?”

“He has some personal vendetta with my client. He wants to outbid him on any bottle I find worth buying, which isn’t ethical. I have to choose one or the other.”

“And clearly the highest bidder isn’t what matters to you.”

“I won’t deny that I’m motivated by money, because that’s business, but I’m not inclined to get in the middle of a war. I don’t know who did who wrong, but ethically, Ed was my client first.”

“If you’re not in the middle of the war, then business is business. I’d take the higher offer, but then, I do run an auction house. That’s the nature of our business. I can vouch for Alexander, by the way. I don’t

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know what's between him and Ed besides you, but he's good for any promise he makes."

Besides me, I repeat in my mind. Am I in between Kace and Alexander?

"That reminds me," Crystal says before I get too far down that rabbit hole. "I have that list of bottles I told you I'd have soon. Unfortunately, they won't arrive until next month, but they're prizes." She sets her coffee down and rushes to her desk and hands me a small envelope. "That's a top-secret sneak peek." She sits down.

"Thank you." I stick the envelope in my bag. "Also, unfortunately, Alexander will likely be bidding and he's not going to let me win for Ed."

"You do have a dilemma on your hands." Her cellphone buzzes with a text and she hurries back to her desk to grab it, groaning. "Duty calls. I need to deal with some new product arriving."

And just like that my chance to talk to her about the violin is lost. I stand up and grab my bag. I'm about to ask about getting together again, and away from here when she beats me to the punch. "Lunch later this week?"

"I'd love that," I say, and I would.

She heads for the door and calls over her shoulder, "I'll call you."

And then she's gone, leaving me in her office alone, showing me trust. Because that's what friends do, I remind myself. They trust each other. And that's where Gio and I differ. He doesn't feel like a secret is a lie, but I do. A secret *is* a lie, the kind that destroys anything real in our lives.

I exit the office and immediately come face to face with the ever stoic and intimidating Mark Compton.

a reckless note

“Ms. Alard,” he greets. “I see you’re becoming a regular fixture around here.”

“Crystal and I had coffee,” I say and I swallow all reservations. “Actually,” I add, preparing to make my case the way I’d practiced in bed last night. “I’m glad I ran into you. Crystal had to take off before I could talk to her about something important. My client, the one bidding on the violin, has actually spent time in Italy with one of the Stradivari family members.”

“They’re all dead, Ms. Alard.”

“Actually, just missing since the early 2000s, but fortunately for my client, he was there before that tragedy. He knows how to spot a fake Stradivarius and he’s taught me as well. If I could just—”

“Look at the photos.”

“They’re incomplete,” I argue.

“They’re quite detailed.” He does not sound pleased.

I’m not backing down. I can’t back down. “Not detailed enough.”

“We’ve included an expert validation included in your VIP package.”

“She’s not the expert I’d choose.”

He arches a brow. “Let me guess. You believe you know better than her, an expert.”

“My client is the expert, as am I, through him.”

“You are quite the pushy one, but you won’t win with me, Ms. Alard. You can see the violin when everyone else sees it.” And with that, he steps around me and enters his wife’s office.

I want to follow him, but I leave it alone. I need to talk to Crystal. Decision made, I hurry forward, and just as I’m walking past the front desk, Amber calls my name. “This was left for you.”

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Hurrying to the desk, I accept the envelope in her hand, assuming that it's something Crystal forgot to add to my package. "Thank you." I shove it in my bag.

Once I'm bundled up and outside, hoping that there might be more photos inside, I step to the side of the door. Grabbing the envelope, I stare at the masculine writing and my belly flutters. I open the flap and pull out a sheet of music, titled, "Aria" and it's not just music. It's lyrics: *She's a mystery and a song, a shadow in the light—*

My gaze jerks to the bottom of the page, where there's a note: *Just in case you're wondering, you're on my mind.*

I gasp. My God.

Kace wrote me a song.

chapter sixteen

I make it two days and most of a night and then, I can't help myself.

The temptation of Kace August is just too much.

I lay in my bed, in my sexiest cotton pajamas, MacBook in my lap, and google his concert locations, only to discover that he's now in Germany. My next google has me tabbing through an article on Kace's event last night. I suck in a sharp breath and sit up straight. There's a photo of Kace standing with a busty blonde who has her hands all over him. An extremely beautiful busty blonde. And I *hate* how much that image stabs me right in the heart. I shut my MacBook and set it aside. I was a fool to fall for the song and the Italian seduction. He's a player, a man with groupies in every country, and most likely a girl at every stop. I'm not the local. I'm not a groupie. I plop down and punch my pillow, but it doesn't help. I'm embarrassed. I'm hurt. I've tunneled into a dark place and it's really got nothing to do with Kace, and yet, somehow it does. I'm not sure when I fall asleep, but I'm pretty sure I counted ten thousand sheep trying to keep my mind from tormenting me.

When I wake to sunlight and a new day, I firmly set Kace August aside.

I spend the next few days working and working hard. I earn a five-thousand-dollar commission on a lot of Beatles memorabilia I'd been working to acquire for a customer for months. With that goal achieved and money in my account, I find a PI who will work for

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exactly that down payment. His reviews are good but seem to be heavily weighted by work hunting down cheating spouses. Still, he can do the basics for me. That's a good start, but I'm smart enough to know that I can't trust anyone with the full truth of who Gio is and why he could easily be in trouble. I will set up a meeting with the PI if Gio is not at the VIP event. In my mind, that night remains my turning point. If Gio isn't back by then, he's in trouble, but logically, I tell myself that anyone who knows who he is won't want him dead. They need him alive to find the formula for the violin. But if I follow that logic, my father is also alive, which of course can't be true and I just have to stop going down that rabbit hole.

Gio is not dead.

The end.

With that thought driving my every moment, the days still manage to tick by as slow as molasses, as my mother would have said. Wednesday arrives with me behind the counter, hunting wine for Ed and Alexander. Not that I've talked to either. Neither has called and while I'm avoiding that freight train ride into a collision, I need more money. I've also identified a couple of bottles each wants that isn't on the other's lists.

Come Friday, it's near closing time when my cellphone rings with a call from Crystal. "Hey you," I greet. "How are you?"

"Sick," she says, her voice cracking. "I have some bug. I've been sick all week. I just wanted you to know that I'm not ignoring you. We were supposed to have lunch."

I blink. "You worried about me?"

a reckless note

“I am. Of course, I am. We made plans, but I’m so behind at work I think we’ll have to try that lunch after the auction.”

We chat a bit and when we disconnect, I decide this is for the best. I really do like Crystal and I don’t want her to feel like I’m using her for the violin. I glance at the clock and I’m about to close up the shop when the bell rings and I glance up to find Alexander entering. “I gave up on you calling me,” he announces. “For some reason, I just *knew* my good looks and charm would win you over.” He expels an exaggerated sigh. “Obviously, I was wrong.”

“I’m aware that you’re good looking,” I say, and he is. Today, he’s absolutely the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome in an expensive blue pin-striped suit that’s fitted to his athletic frame to perfection. “I’m not sure it’s your best quality, though.”

He laughs, a deep laugh some might call sexy, but I’m apparently still lost in Kace August-land, despite Kace August being a complete asshole, because that laugh doesn’t affect me. He saunters over to the opposite side of the counter. “You don’t mind putting me in my place. I like that about you. And for the record, you, Aria, are quite lovely. I’m far more aware of you than I am me.”

“Thank you, Alexander, but we both know you aren’t here to talk about my appearance. Why are you here?”

He glances around the shop. “I wanted to see where you work. It’s a cozy spot.”

“Why are you here?”

“You really don’t love small talk, do you?”

“I like things that are real,” I say and it’s the truth. Too much is not, but those things are out of my control. Others are not.

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He studies me a moment. “That’s a very unexpected answer.”

“It’s an honest answer.”

“I guess I now know why you appeal to me so damn much, Aria. I brought you a gift.”

My brows furrow. “A gift?”

He reaches into his jacket and sets a notecard in front of me. “A list of wine collectors that buy and sell.”

Suspicion prickles and bleeds into my voice. “Why would you give that to me? I could use this to help Ed. I could use this and then charge you for my finds.”

“I’ll pay ten percent for any bottle you source from that list. Twenty for bottles you source elsewhere.”

“That wasn’t an answer. What’s the catch?”

“Ed’s going to call you. Don’t take the call.”

Alarm bells replace suspicion. “Whatever this is—”

“It’s business. Just business.” He reaches into his pocket once more and sets an envelope down next to me. “A healthy retainer for your exclusive services related to the wine.” He glances at his watch. “Unfortunately, I’m headed to the Hamptons on more of that business or I’d suggest we celebrate.”

“I haven’t said yes.”

“No,” he says. “I suppose you haven’t. Cash the check and I’ll know you accept my offer. Then we’ll celebrate.” He catches my hand on the counter, and I suck in a breath, shocked at the intimate connection, waiting for that tingling connection I feel with Kace, but it doesn’t come. He leans in to kiss my hand, lifting it toward his mouth, but I don’t miss the way he seems to pause to study the delicate silver ring of sunflowers on my finger. A full three seconds pass before his lips brush my knuckles and he releases me.

“See you soon,” he says, and he walks toward the door.

a reckless note

I'm vibrating with ten different thoughts and I follow him, and when he exits, I quickly lock up, and then lean on the door to study the ring. Sunflowers are a popular flower in Italy, which connects me to my birthplace, but that isn't why I wear it. It was my mother's ring, a gift from my father, passed down generations. Surely Alexander doesn't know that. Or does he? Does he know who I am?

My gaze lands on the envelope with the retainer and I hurry back behind the counter, grab it, and lift the seal. I remove a check and stare at the figure: fifty-thousand dollars. It's not the first large retainer I've been given, by far, so the figure doesn't stun me, but I've never collected such a fee without a specific item in the spotlight. My gut is screaming that something is off, something is wrong. I glance down at my ring. Something hits too close to home.

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chapter seventeen

The VIP Auction night has finally arrived.

I arrive at Riptide by way of Uber in plenty of time for the preview of the violin, as instructed by my VIP package. Unfortunately, I'm also in another black dress, which isn't ideal from an impression standpoint, but beggars can't be choosers. This particular gown is fitted, knee length with a V-neck, spaghetti straps, and a dusting of glitter. My petite black purse is more a just-big-enough for the necessities. My heels are the same red-bottomed pair I wore to the last event. Nothing I have on except those heels are name brand, but a fancy dress to the common eye is a fancy dress. Of course, not many at this event likely have a common eye, but I can't worry over such things, not tonight.

Exiting the car, I shiver with the night air while my nerves cling and clang, and not just from the windy chill of the night air blowing through my long dark hair. I'm terrified that Gio won't show up. I'm on edge with the idea that Sofia will and that I'll have to confront her, which is exactly what I'll do. I'm also hyperaware of the fact that I'll be seeing Kace tonight.

Leaving my Uber behind, I approach the Riptide entrance and do so in the midst of women in fancy gowns and men dressed in a mix of tuxedos and expensive suits.

A staff member, also in a tuxedo, opens the door for me and once I'm inside, I check my coat, and quickly smooth my hair to order. It's not an updo like so many of the women are wearing tonight for a reason: I'll take

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whatever shield I can get when I intentionally bid, and lose the bid, on the violin that I can't afford to win.

I follow the lobby signs that direct me and a large portion of the ten or so visitors present along with me, to a winding staircase. A short climb later, I step into a room where a dozen dangling crystal chandeliers sparkle above shiny, gold standing tables. And of course, waiters weave in between guests, delivering finger foods and flutes of champagne.

To my right I spy Amber manning a preview booth and hurry that way. "Welcome," she greets.

"Thank you," I say. "I'm excited to be here."

"And expected. Crystal arranged for you to be the first to view the violin. Just exit the room again and go up the stairs to the right and you'll be set."

"Thank you so much, Amber." I start to turn and hesitate. "Who's doing the showing?"

"Mark."

That name is like a thud. *Lord help me*, I think, and obviously, I grimace, because Amber laughs.

I cringe. "I made a face, right?"

"Big-time, but I get it. Mark is hard as steel."

"Is he really as cold as he seems?"

"I used to think so, but after Crystal came into his life, I think he has a softer side. But don't tell him I said that in case he doesn't."

I fake a zip of my pink-painted lips and we both laugh. Offering a tiny wave, and finding it crazy just how at home I've felt at Riptide, even despite Mark's crankiness, I hurry away and exit to the hallway. Finding the stairs, I'm so eager to view the violin, hopeful that it might somehow, someday lead me to Gio, that I barely maintain a respectable pace up the stairs. Reaching the top, I'm halted by a red velvet rope and a tall, stoic man in a suit, with a buzz cut.

a reckless note

“Can I help you, miss?” he inquires.

“Aria! There you are.” Crystal is instantly at the barrier, looking heathy and lovely in a floor-length champagne silk gown with a V-neck, her blonde hair worn long and silky around her pale shoulders. “She’s approved, Jacob,” she says, motioning to the rope. “This is Aria Alard on your list.”

“Of course,” he says, quite formally, but he also quickly unhooks the rope and welcomes me forward.

I step into a foyer of sorts with another gorgeous chandelier directly above while Crystal makes sure Jacob and I are properly acquainted. “Jacob’s with Walker Security, but he’s also a friend. The man literally saved my life, which is a long story that requires drinks. He’s amazing. He’s good friends with Chris and Kace as well.”

Kace.

She keeps bringing up Kace. I keep thinking about him, too, which is why I focus on Jacob. “Nice to meet you, Jacob.”

“Likewise,” he says, but he remains stoic, a hint of danger to him. I wonder how he saved Crystal’s life, but I sense something beneath her surface, a cautious edge that somehow defies her friendliness.

“Speaking of Kace, Jacob,” Crystal says, “where is he? He was supposed to be here with Aria for the first showing.”

Adrenaline surges through me. She’s clearly matchmaking and just the idea of him being here with me heats my skin.

“His flight hit some weather,” Jacob replies. “He just called in to inform me that he won’t make the preview, but he’s on his way.”

Disappointment that should be relief flits through me. My God, what is wrong with me? Crystal links her

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arm with mine. “Come. Let’s go see that violin.” She tugs me along and we head down a hallway.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she says. “Still a bit of lingering queasiness, but I’m finally walking, talking, and even chewing bubblegum.”

I’d nudge her on the topic of pregnancy, but I don’t know her well enough, I decide, and besides, we’re already in front of a giant silver vault door, with a fifty-something armed guard in uniform next to it. “I’m leaving you here with Louis,” Crystal informs me. “I have to head downstairs, but I’ll see you again soon. I hope it’s what you’re looking for. I’ve seen it. It’s stunning.”

She departs and Louis hits a buzzer next to the door and chit-chats not at all. A few seconds later, it opens and another guard steps aside to allow my entry. I walk forward and pause just inside a room lined with lockboxes. In the center of that room is Mark Compton, looking intimidating and perfect in a tuxedo, his square jaw set hard, and standing next to the violin that is encased in glass.

The door behind me seals.

I wait for an invitation to approach that doesn’t immediately follow.

Mark just stands there staring at me, dripping arrogance, power, and judgment, his handsome face schooled to steel. His gray eyes hard.

“Approach,” he commands.

I don’t need to be told twice.

My feet move forward in a slow, steady pace, but my heart is racing. The violin is in fact, beautiful, the exterior shiny and perfect, and the truth is that this is the first time I have been near a Stradivarius, or any violin for that matter since I was a child. Memories

a reckless note

flood my mind of my father playing and crafting the Stradi, his creation, that could not duplicate our ancestors' work. I stop at the glass and glance up at Mark. "Can it be removed from the glass?"

He lifts a hand. "William."

Instantly, a man I hadn't even noticed until now, William it seems, steps forward, dressed in a protective cape and gloves. Mark inclines his chin at William and William opens the case. A few delicate touches later, and William gently settles the violin on a soft blue blanket. For several minutes, he shifts the instrument around for me, and I study the craftsmanship, which is quite impressive, but this type of inspection will not deliver the answers I seek.

I cast Mark a dubious look. "I'll need a light to look inside the instrument for a proper assessment."

His expression is unreadable, but he does respond. He pulls a flashlight from his pocket and hands it to me, but as I reach for it, he pulls it back. "Do *not* touch the instrument. William will do that for you. Understand?"

"Understood," I confirm, which earns me a probing stare before he allows me to accept the flashlight.

For the next ten minutes, I have William angle the instrument for me in several directions as I look for the marking my father said would be inside any original Stradivarius instrument. Antonio Stradivari had included a label on each instrument and printed the first digit "1," but the last three digits were in script. This checks out. An authentic label will be handwritten with 732, old Roman font, and the creator, Antonio's age at the time. Many fakes include font not of the proper century but in this case, the font is accurate. What's missing is what many simply don't know to look for. In each instrument, he included a

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unique watermark to ensure duplicates could not be created. This one does not have that watermark.

I glance up at Mark. "It's fake. A good fake, still worth millions, but it's not an original."

Mark's jaw sets hard. "The instrument is authentic. We've had it authenticated."

"Incorrectly," I assure him confidently. This is my ancestry. This is my world, even if, for now, I'm forced to hide that fact. "Antonio Stradivari placed a unique watermark in each instrument." I add, "This one does not have it."

"That is not documented in any analysis of authenticity that I've seen."

"But it's accurate."

"Based on your client's visit to Italy?"

My jaw clenches. "Based on a relationship with the ancestral family."

"Unless you can provide me with your client's credentials, that's not enough."

"Okay." I press my lips together. "I just—I don't want you to get burned, but thank you for the showing."

I turn and head for the door, where I push a button. The guard opens it and just as I am about to exit Mark says, "Ms. Alard."

I twist around to face him. "Yes?"

"Are you bidding on the violin?"

He believes I'm trying to corner the market on the auction in some way, which bites but is understandable. He doesn't know me. "My client seeks an original, so therefore, no I am not." With that, I turn and exit, and I'm actually the one who is burned, not by Mark, but the absence of any answers. There was nothing in that vault to help me find my brother. I just have to hope he shows up to bid.

a reckless note

I rush down the stairs to search the crowd for Gio, entering the cocktail room to come face to face with Alexander. “There she is,” he greets, offering me a warm smile and giving me a once over. “Looking lovely yet again, Ms. Alard.”

He’s a charming man, he really is, and a man driven by some inner demons, I think, but in my ponderings about his offer, I do believe he reminds me a little too much of the past for comfort; of men I remember visiting my father before he disappeared. I smooth his lapel. “You look snazzy yourself, Alexander.”

“I’m glad you approve. You haven’t cashed the check I left you.”

“I haven’t. I’m—still thinking. I’ll call you tomorrow. Okay?”

“Why don’t we talk it out after the auction?” His eyes are warm, too warm.

“I’m meeting someone here tonight and forgive me, but I really need to find Crystal.” Which isn’t a lie. A friend warns a friend. Mark won’t listen, but I have to hope she will. “Have you seen her?”

“I haven’t.”

“Okay, thanks.” I turn away from him and quickly bury myself in the crowd, away from him, and hunting for Crystal. Hunting for Gio. Hunting for the mysterious Sofia. When I come up empty, and it’s almost time for the performance to begin, I decide to head back to the lobby and have the guard locate Crystal for me.

A few minutes later, I’m told she’s in a vault and unreachable. I send her a text: *The violin is not authentic. I made my case to Mark but I feel as a friend I should warn you. I believe this passionately. I understand you have to move forward, but I would be remiss not to give you my thoughts.*

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She sends a text back: *I told Mark we should have it reevaluated at our expense should the buyer wish. Thank you, Aria.*

Relieved that I achieved some level of success in protecting them, I head back to the event and the minute I step back in the room, I know Kace is here. It's insane, but I feel his energy. I swallow hard and just when I would dare a glass of champagne, the crowd parts to him standing in the midst of several attractive women and a man, all of whom appear enamored with him.

And why wouldn't they be?

He's Kace August, talented, good looking, and dressed to stand out and perform. He's in black jeans, a thin soft-looking black leather jacket, and a black T-shirt with a white flag on it that he's paired with black boots. His spiky longish dark hair is slightly ruffled, his jaw shadowed, and his brilliant blue eyes are suddenly locked on me, a punch of awareness between us that steals my breath.

He excuses himself from the group, dismissing them with finality, and then he's closing the space between me and him and I can't seem to walk away. I've barely caught my breath when he's standing in front of me, towering over me, smelling like spice and man—seducing me without even saying a word. And then he does, he speaks. He says *one word*. My name. "Aria." And on his lips it vibrates like a musical note that vibrates with a command, and yet purrs with seduction.

In this moment, the room fades, the clink of glasses and hum of voices disappears. There is just me and him.

chapter eighteen

“You’re here,” I whisper, despite that being quite obvious.

He reaches up and strokes a lock of hair behind my ear, his touch shivering through me. “I hope that’s a good thing.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“You confuse me, Kace.”

Chris Merit’s wife appears beside us. “They need you for a soundcheck in ten.” She glances at me and she’s incredibly pretty up close and personal, her eyes brown, her skin porcelain. Her smile is friendly. “Hi Aria,” she greets. “I’m Sara, Chris’s wife. We have a seat saved for you up front with me so when you’re ready, find me.”

“Nice to meet you, Sara. Thank you.”

“No thanks needed. Looking forward to chatting. See you soon,” she says, fading into the crowd. Kace catches my fingers at my side and I feel that connection in every part of me, inside and out.

“In case you didn’t figure it out, I got you a seat up front with me.” He kisses my knuckles and unlike the moment Alexander had done the same, I tingle all the way up my arm and across my chest. “Come with me.” It’s somehow a command and yet it’s a question he waits to have answered.

The photo of him with that blonde flits through my mind, a warning, but then I remind myself that we barely know each other. We have no commitment. I

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can't even afford a commitment. But Gio isn't here. I know this. He's not going to be here, either. Suddenly, I want an escape, even need it for my sanity. I want to do something just because I want to do it. And what I want is to live in the moment for once. I want to live in the moment with this man. I want to watch him play. I want to know him just a little bit. I wet my dry lips, his gaze following the movement, the idea of him kissing me flooding me with heat.

"Come with me," he urges again when those blue eyes fix on mine, seeming to need my approval in a way I don't understand. But I like it.

I give a nod.

His eyes warm with his approval, which I hunger for far too much and then he's leading me through the crowd, murmuring greetings to fans, even sliding his arm around me at one point. We're huddling together as we clear the crowd and head toward a doorway behind the open bar.

We end up at a door and step into a hallway I didn't know existed. Kace rotates me and settles me against the wall and his powerful legs frame mine, one of his hands on the wall by my head. The other is at my waist, his touch scorching me. "Crystal told me you thought I was hot and cold."

My lips part in shock. "You wrote me a song."

"I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"And then you left."

"I told you I had to leave."

"You know it's more than that. You touch me. You leave. You touch me again. You leave. You write me a song. You leave. I—I don't know what we're doing."

"The auction meant we would end up here, tonight, bidding on the same item. That's complicated and I

a reckless note

damn sure didn't want you to think that I was trying to influence your bid."

The auction that I can't afford to win. Guilt stabs at me and I grab his jacket, ready to confess. "Kace—"

"And I'm not good for you, Aria. I need you to know that right now. In fact, I'm ten shades of bad you should run from."

It's a warning defines every hot and cold moment with this man, and I *should* run. But I'm not running, not when he's standing right here, and there's this rough, edgy quality to him that calls to me in ways I cannot explain. "Then why are we standing here?"

His eyes, those potent blue eyes, lower to my mouth where they linger, and I know—*I just know*—that he is thinking about kissing me, and I can barely breathe with the eternal moments that tick between us.

"Because," he says, his gaze lifting to mine, "I kissed you and now I can't stop tasting you on my tongue." Suddenly, his fingers are tangling into my hair and our lips are a breath from touching. "And I want more. So damn much more." And then he's kissing me, his tongue pressing past my teeth, caressing deep, a sensual stroke I feel in every part of me. I'm melting into the hard lines of his body.

I can taste his hunger, his need, that darkness beneath his surface I have sensed, and it draws me to him, it burns me alive. Maybe it's the good girl in me, captive to a life not of my choosing, but that edge in him pulls me under, drugs me. I'm all in for these moments with this man, and I forget all the reserve I've lived with my entire life. I'm nothing but this moment, nothing but pure submission, pure need for this man. Pure need for escape.

Abruptly the door to our right, opens and a man clears his throat. Kace tears his mouth from mine but

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he doesn't immediately look at our visitor. His eyes are locked on me. "That, Aria, is why we're here." Only with that declaration does he look to our visitor, as do I.

Chris Merit stands there, his blond hair ruffled, his T-shirt a splattering of intentional paint, and my God, I've been caught making out with a world-famous musician by a world-famous artist.

I don't know how Chris knew where to find us or how he timed it just when he did, but he did. And here we are.

"Evening, Aria," Chris greets, and thankfully he doesn't wait for my reply because I'm fairly certain I have no use of my vocal cords right now.

He glances at Kace. "They're ready for us, man," and with that, he disappears.

"Oh my God, I'm embarrassed," I murmur.

"It's Chris. You won't meet a more private person or one you can trust more than him. He won't say anything. I promise." He stokes my lip, his lips quirking at the edges. "But your lipstick all over the place might." He rubs a couple of spots and says, "All clear. And you still have on lipstick."

"And you don't somehow."

He catches my hand. "We have to get in there, but if I win the violin, if your client matches the bid, I'll let him have it. I have a collection of violins, including several Stradivariuses. I don't need to have this one, too."

I blanch at the idea of his collection, but also his generosity. "You barely know me," I say. "Why would you do that?"

His fingers brush my jaw. "I want to know you, Aria. That's what I'm telling you." He kisses my hand again and when he would lead me to the door, I tug him back. "Wait. Wait, it's important."

a reckless note

If he feels the pressure of those waiting on him, he doesn't show it. He's cool. He's easy. He's right here, giving me his attention. "What is it?"

"I'm not bidding. Don't bid." And then, pressed by time, I dump it all on him. "The violin isn't real, Kace. Mark won't listen to me because I'm not credentialed, but I swear to you it's not authentic. It's a good fake, worth millions, but not the millions it's going to go for. I'd never steer you wrong. I'm protecting you."

He cups the side of my face and leans in, his lips pressing to mine, his tongue doing a fast, sensual slide before he says, "I believe you, baby. I won't bid."

The endearment does funny things to my stomach as he adds, "Don't leave without me tonight."

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chapter nineteen

Kace leads me into a room where rows of chairs await hundreds of guests while the stage to our left awaits Kace and Chris. Actually, Chris is already on the stage, kneeling at the edge, talking with Sara, who stands just beneath him. A few other men in black jeans and matching black T-shirts are also present with Chris, fiddling about with the performance set behind him. Kace slides an arm around me, possessiveness to his touch that sends a shiver down my spine. His mood though is light, as he points to one of the men on stage: a tall, good looking man with blond hair and about the same age as Kace. “That’s Micky,” Kace informs me. “He’s my guitarist. He travels with me and has for five years. Micky, this is Aria.”

Micki gives me a mock salute, a bright blue tattoo of a guitar on his forearm. “Hey Aria,” he says. “Welcome.”

Kace points at a tall muscular black man with a buzz cut. “That’s Marvin Gay. My producer.”

I blink up at him and then at Marvin. “Marvin Gay?”

“My parents loved them some Marvin,” Marvin says, holding his hands out to his sides. “And so here I am. Making music with Kace.”

He’s friendly and easy to instantly like. I laugh and Kace points out one more person. A tall dark-haired man—and I mean tall, like six feet four—with curly dark hair who I age in his mid-forties, based on the salt and pepper of his goatee. “That’s my manager, Sam,”

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Kace adds, “otherwise known as Bear and not because he’s tall. He’s a real cranky ass.”

“Don’t believe him,” Bear says. “I’m a honey bear. Sweet as can be. His bastard agent, Nix, is the one to watch out for.”

“He kind of is,” Kace whispers conspiratorially, “but he’s not here.” He motions to Sara to join us, which prompts Chris to cup her head, the bright colors of what I now know is a dragon tattoo, or rather full sleeve, on display, as he kisses her and then murmurs something to her. I watch them, the way they lean into each other, and there’s a raw sensuality about them, but also a deep bond beyond that sensuality that I can’t seem to help but envy.

“Sara will take good care of you when I’m on stage,” Kace informs me, and then leans in, nuzzling my neck. “I promise to take good care of you when I’m off.”

My cheeks burn, and based on his laugh, all low and sexy, he doesn’t miss the redness. “You are such a contradiction, baby.”

I have no idea what this means, except for the fact that I made out with him in the hallway and then blushed at his suggestive words. “I like it,” he adds, the playfulness of the moments before shifting to something far more intense, something I can’t quite name, but there is a crackling current between us that literally steals my breath. I want this man and he is so beyond dangerous, but I just can’t seem to care. I wonder if that’s how Gio feels about Sofia. I wonder if that led him down a path of temptation and destruction. Will it do the same to me? Will Kace?

The spell between us is broken as Sara appears before us in a stunning silver knee-length dress, greeting us with a bright smile. “Ready for this, Kace?” she asks.

a reckless note

“Always,” he assures her, and then glances down at me, his hand warm on my lower back, his gaze sweeping my mouth and lifting. “See you soon,” he says softly, and somehow he manages to turn those simple words into a seduction.

He releases me, heading to the stage, and I’m far too cold without that man’s hands on my body for my own good.

“We’re in the front,” Sara announces, motioning me toward the chairs.

I follow her lead and we settle into our spots at the end of the aisle. Kace has now started to play a few random notes, testing his tuning. The sound of his violin vibrates through me, nestling deep in my soul and threatening to stir a million memories.

“I’m really excited about this,” Sara says. “Chris and Kace have been talking about performing together since they were both at the same charity event a year and a half ago.”

“They’ve known each other for a long time, right?”

“Forever, even before I met Chris, but that event was really where they became friends, not acquaintances. And now they have three events and back-to-back shows together. Are you going with us to Austin and California?”

He’s leaving again. That’s what I take from her question and it’s my reality check on what to expect in the future. Kace leaves. That’s what Kace does. “No,” I say. “We’re just getting to know each other.”

“And yet here you are.”

My brows furrow. “What does that mean?”

“He doesn’t bring women to his shows. He doesn’t let anyone inside his personal life, not even his crew.”

“Why me?” I ask, speaking what is on my mind without meaning to.

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“You’ll have to ask Kace that question, but as Chris always says to me, because you’re you. I know what it’s like to be with a man who seems bigger than life, but underneath the fame, he’s a man. Just a man. One not likely to trust easily and that comes from life lessons. Don’t forget that.”

No one understands life lessons more than me, but as for me being me—I’m not me. I’m a lie, which only makes her words about trust more powerful. “Thank you,” I say and I turn my gaze to Kace as he plays a small bit off Prince’s *Purple Rain* and then stops, talking to Marvin and Chris.

“Doors opening in three minutes!” someone shouts out, and then to my shock, the blonde from the photo I’d seen of Kace in Germany is on the stage, offering everyone water and doing so in a pink dress with lots of cleavage. Tension radiates through me and when she stops in front of Kace and rubs his arm, my fingers curl into my palms. She’s touching him again.

She steps to the left and I end up in Kace’s direct view. He’s staring at me, those blue eyes piercing me even from a distance, the push and pull between us potent. His eyes narrow and I see the question and answer in his face. He knows I’m uncomfortable with that exchange. Damn it, he knows, and I’m conflicted about how I feel about that. I have no rights to this man. I know this. We barely know each other, but I have no interest in groupie status.

Kace cuts his stare, catching the woman’s arm. He whispers something to her and there is a knot in my chest that I don’t have the capacity to handle. I move, intending to stand up, but Sara catches my arm. “That’s Kelly, but everyone calls her Kiki. She’s the operations manager for his tours. Kace is all business with his crew. She’s just a toucher.”

a reckless note

“Seems like he was touching her, too.”

“No. He was just trying to get her attention.” She motions to the stage. “And that’s why.”

I jerk my gaze in the direction she’s indicated and the toucher hops off the stage and heads right for me.

I turn to Sara. “Sara—”

“I promise you. There is nothing between her and Kace. *I promise you.*”

I have no idea why her promise helps the way it helps, but it eases the pressure in my chest. Right then, Kiki kneels in front of me and I rotate to stare down at her. She’s even prettier up close, her skin porcelain, her eyes a paler blue than Kace’s, but oh so pretty. She grabs my hand. “I’m Kiki, Aria. So nice to meet you.” I don’t even try to reply and she quickly adds, “Please know there is nothing between me and Kace. He’s like a big brother. Forgive me, and him, if I gave you another idea.”

“One minute until doors open!” someone shouts.

“I have to go,” she says urgently. “I hope we can talk later.” She stands up and walks away.

Kace is on the edge of the stage now, and he motions between him and me and then silently mouths, “Stay.” I can’t explain how or why, but that tiny action, paired with him sending Kiki to talk to me, is an act of vulnerability I get the feeling he doesn’t dare with many. This talented, amazing man is really afraid I might leave while he performs. And once again, doubt fades into the room and evaporates. “Yes,” I silently mouth in reply.

He studies me a moment, searching my face, and I don’t know what he’s looking for, but Chris pats his arm to gain his attention and motions to the stairs. Just that quickly, Kace is turning away, and I can see the

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stiffening of his spine, the shift to the performer, to a persona.

Sara glances behind her. “They’re piling in. It’s time. I’m nervous and I don’t know why. Chris could paint hanging upside down.”

“Because you love him,” I say. “And he loves you.”

Her expression softens. “Yes. Yes, I do and he does.”

There’s no hesitation in her, no question of their love.

I twist around to watch the crowd pile in and there is no way I’ll find Gio, let alone Sofia, unless they bid on the violin. Even then, I’m not sure we’d find each other. Maybe if I bid to draw attention to myself. On the very violin, which I told Kace not to bid on. He’ll end up thinking that I set him up. The man let me into his world, and it’s clear that it isn’t common. I can’t, *I won’t* let him think that was a bad decision. I’d have to talk to him first and what would I even tell him, that wasn’t too much?

I lean over to Sara and lower my voice. “My brother might be here tonight. Any ideas on how I’d find out?”

“The auction house knows who shows up, but you’ll need Crystal or Mark to find out for you.”

“Right. Of course. I’ll text Crystal. Thank you.” I pull my phone from my purse and key up my messages with Crystal to type: *My brother Gio Alard might be here. I can’t find him in the crowd. He wasn’t sure he’d make it back into town.* I stop typing. I’d know if my brother was on the VIP list. I would have told Crystal he was already on the list. She’d know the last name from my last name. Crystal already said she doesn’t know Sofia. Gio isn’t here. He’s not going to be here. He was never going to be here. I suddenly need to breathe before I make a fool of myself and start crying.

a reckless note

I lean over to whisper to Sara. “Ladies’ room. If Kace comes out, please don’t let him think I left.”

She points to the door I came in with Kace. “Go that way. He’s there.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“You won’t be intruding. There’s a small bathroom to the right when you exit into the hallway.”

Accepting that my escape to compose myself is now waylaid, I simply say, “Thank you,” standing up and hurrying in the direction she’s given me.

Marvin waves at me from the stage, not the least concerned about me heading into private crew territory. I’m not sure what to make of that, but I open the door to the hallway and step inside. Kace and Chris are standing there, both leaning a shoulder on the wall and it’s like being pierced with a beam of testosterone and hotness, the two of them almost too much in one place. They both straighten. Chris immediately nods at Kace and turns and walks right.

Kace is already stepping toward me and catching my hand, aligning our bodies and every part of me is tingling. “Hey,” he says softly, stroking my cheek.

“Hey,” I whisper. “I was just going to the bathroom.”

“Kiki’s a friend. She’s not with me. She’s never been with me.”

My hand flattens on his chest. “You don’t have to tell me this. We’re just—”

He cups my face and tilts my gaze to his. “We’re just what?”

“I don’t know, Kace.”

He stares down at me, eternal seconds passing in which I can’t read his chiseled expression, until he says, “Neither do I, baby, but I never will if I don’t make sure you know that Kiki is not with me.” His hands find their

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way under my hair, to my neck. “You have my full attention, like it or not.”

“Like it or not?”

“I’m many things you might not like, Aria, but I own those things.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I know.” He leans in and kisses me. “Go to the bathroom. I want you in there when I take the stage.”

My hand is still on the hard wall of his chest, the thundering of his heart that tells me he’s affected by what he’s spoken. Words that suddenly read like a confession that I don’t understand. I’m affected by him. He consumes me, so easily he consumes me, and though I know deep down that he is too close to all that I have run from, I can’t seem to run from him. Instead, I find myself wanting to know more, to understand him.

He turns me to face the direction Chris walked, leaning in to whisper, “Hurry back.”

I hesitate and then turn to face him. “I’m not leaving,” I say and I said the words because I meant them and because for indiscernible reasons I feel that he needs to hear them.

A flicker of something in the depths of his stare is there and gone before he cups my head, kisses me, and then turns me around again. “Good. Now hurry, baby.”

I don’t know how the word “baby” spoken by this man weakens my knees quite so completely, but coming from Kace August, it melts me right here in this hallway.

Still, somehow, I start walking, the weight of his stare hot and heavy, but the bathroom is close. I slip inside the single-occupant space and lock the door. I lean against it and stare into the mirror directly across from me. What is happening to me?

a reckless note

My cellphone rings and thinking it might be Crystal, I quickly snag it from my purse to find an unknown number. It could be a client. It could be Crystal calling from a phone inside the auction house. It could be Gio. My hand trembles as I punch the button. "Hello?"

There's crackling in the background and I'm almost certain that I hear a female voice. I push off the door and desperation and gut instinct overtakes me. "Sofia?" I say because it just feels right.

Suddenly the line is silent, even the crackling fading. And then it goes dead.

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chapter twenty

I'm haunted by that call for no good reason.

It was a butt dial, I tell myself. Someone called me by accident.

Wasn't it? Didn't they?

A full minute of me staring at my screen passes and I force myself to slide my phone back into my purse, to move on. I hurry to the sink, where I re-apply my missing lipstick. Missing because Kace kissed me. Because he keeps kissing me. And I keep letting him kiss me. I keep kissing him. And liking it. I really like it and him. So much, but I'm not overthinking this—whatever this is—going on between us. Okay, I will overthink every moment with this man, because that's what I do, just not now. I'll wait until later tonight when I'm home alone in my own bed.

Right now, Kace is waiting for me and hundreds of people are waiting for him.

I finger comb my hair, and then I rush to the door, but I pause with a jolt of my mind that shoots me right back to that call. If it was truly a butt dial, why did my gut tell me it was Sofia? And it did. There's a knock on the door, and I chide myself for holding up Kace when the show must go on.

I open the door and suck in a breath to find Kace standing right there, right in front of me, his hand pressed to the doorjamb, his snug T-shirt stretched across an impressive chest. His big, perfect body is the best kind of barrier a girl could wish for. He catches my

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hand and steps me into him, tingling sensations darting up my arm and across my chest.

“Ready?” he asks, a rough masculine push beneath the question.

“Why do I feel as if that question could mean a million things with you?”

Mischief floods his blue eyes. “Because your mind is presently someplace I, unfortunately, can’t visit with you until after this event.”

“Shouldn’t you be out there already?”

“I have about three minutes, which means you need to get back out front.” He slides his arm around me and just that easily, we are in motion down the empty hallway.

“Showtime, August!”

At the sound of Chris’s voice behind us, Kace twists around and walks backward. “Hell yeah, man. Let’s go do this big for a big cause.”

“Is there any other way?” Chris asks.

We arrive at the door leading to the auction room and Kace rotates, placing himself between me and Chris, his hand settling possessively at my waist. “There is no other way,” he says softly. “Not if you really want something.” And suddenly I don’t think he’s talking about the show anymore. He cups my face. “Don’t leave without me.” He doesn’t give me time to reply. He opens the door and the clink and clatter of glasses mixes with the hum of voices. Crystal’s voice sounds over the speakers as she speaks to the crowd, the urgency of me taking my seat quite clear.

“Good luck, Kace,” I whisper, and dare to kiss his cheek.

I see a fleeting moment of heat in his eyes and something else, something indiscernible I desperately wish that I could read before I rotate away from him

a reckless note

and into the auction room. With fast steps, I quickly travel past the stage to the seating area that is now stacked with bodies, the lights low, muting faces. The other guests can see me but I can't see them. Discomfort rattles around inside me, the defensive instincts drilled into me my entire life telling me to shy away from the spotlight. But that's impossible, as there's nowhere to go but into the spotlight right now, especially considering I'm the guest of one of the stars of the night right upfront.

Finally, I settle into my seat next to Sara, and just in time too as Crystal has stepped away from the podium and the lights go down. Sara grabs my hand. "I'm so excited and nervous."

Marvin's guitar screams roughly, wildly through the air and the music shoots adrenaline through me. I'm here, in the front row, when Kace August is about to play while Chris Merit paints. I'm here, living life, experiencing the past, the present—and on some level, I believe—my future, right here, right now. Gio was right. I never live life. Ever. But I am now, and there is no denying the thrill that comes with this night, and every moment I've spent with Kace, really with myself, out in the real world. I squeeze Sara's hand. "Me, too."

Little white lights twinkle in a musical formation when suddenly a violin starts playing the dramatic intense notes of a cover of "Bitter Sweet Symphony" by The Verve.

The lights come up and Kace is right in front of me, playing while Chris is to my right, painting. The crowd explodes into applause, while drums manned by a tall man with black hair streaked blue accents the drama. Sara and I slowly release each other and relax into the show as it's so very clear that Kace and Chris are magical together. Chris's canvas becomes a bridge, the

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Golden Gate Bridge, and I soon realize as Kace's music morphs into an intense, edgy rendition of "Back in Black" by AC/DC, he's right beside Chris. Chris's hand moves with the mood of the music, more jugged action to his strokes, and buildings begin to appear on his canvas.

Song after song, the room absorbs every moment of the show, and when finally, Chris's canvas is done, he stands, and Kace lowers his violin. Side by side, they take a bow, and when Kace's gaze slides to me, his lips curve as he gives me a wink. My stomach flutters and I erupt in applause with the rest of the room.

Crystal joins them on stage, microphone in hand. "Wow," she says. "Just wow. Two of the most talented people on planet earth right here on our stage. And I have even more of a treat for you. The violin Kace played on tonight and Chris's painting are both up for auction. And be generous, please. All proceeds will be given to The Addiction and Suicide Prevention Society, an organization that will be supported by each of the four shows Kace and Chris will do together over the next month in various locations. Each event will include different music and a different work on the canvas. You can look those events up online or we have brochures for you at the door as you leave. And without further ado, our auctioneers for the night."

A man in a tuxedo steps in front of Kace, and Kace hands off his violin. Chris and Kace walk to the side of the stage and the next thing I know, they're headed toward us. Only then do I realize that there are two empty seats next to me. I quickly move over to allow Chris a spot next to Sara. Kace sits down next to me and his hand is instantly on my leg as if we're a couple when we've only just met. The charge between us is electric.

a reckless note

“The show was, of course, amazing,” I whisper. “Being here for it was amazing. That you did it for charity is special.”

Something flickers in his eyes—surprise, I think—though I’m not sure why. He leans in and kisses me, which is sure to garner attention I don’t need. Actually, every moment I spend with a rock star like Kace is attention I don’t need, but I just can’t seem to care. The auctioneer is now covering the auction rules while Kace and I reluctantly, it feels, settle into our seats.

The auction begins with Kace’s violin, which is not a Stradivarius, but rather an authentic Guadagnini—also a masterful instrument, donated by a local billionaire who is in the audience. The bid starts at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and quickly becomes competitive. Kace sits there, staring at the stage, and I can feel the tension in him, the man, the human being, who is nervous, who feels performance pressure. His fingers tense on my legs, and when finally, the bid ends at the insane figure of one million dollars, his shoulders ease, his fingers relax. Next up is Chris’s painting, which ends at one-point-two million dollars.

Kace and Chris lean forward, sharing a look of pride and a connection that radiates between them. Tonight matters to them. The charity matters to them. Suicide has touched both of their lives and there is no joy, only tragedy in such a thing. In that moment, I remember Sara saying that they are just men. I expand on that in my mind. They have loves, likes, passions, and pain because we all have pain. *We all have pain*. We are the sum of all of those things—I am the sum of all of those things. I find myself wanting to understand and know Kace but I warn myself that you have to give what you get.

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If I begin a journey to know him, he, too, will begin a journey to know me. I'm not sure that's safe for either one of us. But then he looks at me and laces his fingers with mine, and I remind myself that Gio likes his adventures. Gio has disappeared before. He may well be off roaming the world with Sofia. And here I am, right here, alone.

Except that I'm not alone. I'm with Kace.

chapter twenty-one

The spell between Kace and I is broken when the auction of the Stradivarius is announced, sold by an anonymous seller, an instrument the auctioneer claims to once have been long lost. *More like an imitation of an instrument long lost*, I think, which of course, Gio would have figured out as well—if he'd seen it. But Mark didn't even allow Kace an early viewing. Gio couldn't have seen it. Maybe he had a tip that it was fake?

The auctioneer continues his chatter, diving into a lengthy history of the violin that is *not* true since it's a fake. On and on and on he continues, hyping the audience for what will likely be a ten-million-dollar-plus final bid. That's big money and I wonder if Mark really will take my warnings about the violin's authenticity to heart. With the bidding quickly approaching, I wonder if Kace truly will as well. Kissing me doesn't equal knowing me. Neither Kace nor Mark understand my exceptional credentials, and how could they? I am a ghost hiding behind another identity.

I inhale and my gaze lands on Kace's hand on my leg, the hand of a gifted man. The hand of a man who has touched the violins made by my ancestor, that I myself, have not touched since I was a young child. The hand of a man who has stormed into my life with his presence and stirred forbidden desires in all kinds of ways. My hand settles on his, a desperate attempt to control him, to control me, but it doesn't work. Now,

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I'm touching him, and he's touching me, and his presence is fluttering through me in all kinds of ways.

My eyes lift and I'm pinned by Kace's blue-eyed stare, lost in a sea of passion and the forbidden, drowning in a man I barely know but cannot help but *want* to know. The bid on the violin starts at one hundred thousand dollars. Bids are placed rapid-fire, and at five hundred thousand dollars, I can't see who is bidding, not at all. Kace arches a brow, a silent question: *do I want to bid?* I shake my head, a no to any idea I might do so, to the idea that he should do so.

His response is to lean in close, his lips at my ear, his breath warm on my neck, his hand on my jaw as he murmurs, "Let's get out of here."

My initial thought is no. I can't. But that doesn't last long. My brother isn't here and suddenly I'm suffocating in that reality. That violin is not the answer to any question he or I would ask. I don't believe Sofia is here, either. I have no reason to be here now but him, and when he eases back to study me, I don't make him wait, I don't make him push. My hand settles on his hand where it still touches my face, and I whisper, "Yes."

His eyes heat with approval, and he eases forward around me, speaking to Chris, I believe, though I can't hear what is said. A moment later, he stands and takes me with him. Adrenaline surges through me as I'm being led toward the side of the stage by Kace August and there is no way that goes unnoticed. Meanwhile, the bids for the violin continue to charge to a higher price tag, now at three million. Kace opens the exit door and we step into the hallway. The instant the door shuts behind us, Kace drags me close, the hard wall of his body absorbing mine.

a reckless note

“What are you doing to me, woman?” he demands, and then his fingers have spiked into my hair, his mouth slanting over my mouth, his tongue stroking deep. And then I’m drowning in this man, bright lights exploding in a sea of what has been so much darkness, so much loneliness. And I *have* been lonely. I’ve hidden from it. I’ve denied it. I’ve convinced myself that I didn’t need certain things, but right here, right now, I need *him*. I need *this*.

And when he tears his mouth from mine, and says, “Come home with me,” it’s all I can to do find solid ground, to remember who I am, who he is, to remember how dangerous that connection might become.

“Kace, I—”

“Don’t say no.” He presses his lips to my ear and whispers. “I never take women home with me. Ever. But I’m asking you to come home with me now.”

“Never?”

He pulls back, his warm breath leaving a trail of goosebumps on my neck as he meets my stare. “Never,” he confirms.

I’m not sure what to feel, what to think. “Why me?”

“Because I can’t help myself with you, Aria. And that doesn’t happen. Not to me. Come home with me.”

My hand lands on the solid wall of his chest, his heart thundering beneath my palm, his body telling me that his words aren’t just words—he means his words. I should say no. I know I should say no but it’s just one night. It’s always one night with a man like Kace August. And before I can stop myself, I say exactly what he wants me to say, what I want to say, “Yes.”

His mouth closes over mine again, the taste of him hungry, wicked, addictive, and gone too soon. “Let’s get out of here before someone slows us down,” he

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murmurs, and when I mouth “yes,” he waits for nothing more. He catches my hand and leads me down a hallway to yet another hallway and then an exit where a tall, bald, muscular man in a tuxedo, awaits.

“Mr. August,” he greets and then inclines his chin at me, a hint of a tattoo peeking from beneath his collar. “Ma’am.”

“Hey, Leo,” Kace replies. “We’re out of here for the night.”

“Understood,” Leo confirms before he knocks on the door and someone opens it from the other side. Cold air gusts through the door and I shiver and turn to Kace. “My coat.” Kace instantly shrugs out of his, wrapping the soft leather that was just next to his body around mine, using the lapels to step me into him. “Better?”

“Yes,” I say, no longer cold despite the still open door, but decidedly warm and swoony “But I should go upfront and grab my own coat.”

“Not without walking through the auction room and the front doors are locked for VIP events. Do you have a ticket?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” I reach in my purse and hand it to him.

“We’ll have it delivered to my place.” He is about to step away when Leo holds up a hand. “I’ll handle it.”

Kace arches a brow. “You can blow up buildings and bad guys *and* retrieve coats?”

“Walker Security is nothing if not versatile, and as part of your security team, I’d prefer your address to stay with us. I got this.” He eyes me. “You’ll have your coat before the evening ends.”

“Thank you, Leo,” I say.

Leo offers me a tiny nod. “My absolute pleasure.”

a reckless note

Kace shakes his hand and then he's whisking me into the night air and a private alleyway with his car parked to our right. We head that way and a valet opens the passenger door for me. Kace's hand strokes my hair and he's right there with me as I climb inside, but he doesn't linger. I'm quickly enclosed inside the Roadster with the seductive scent of man and leather now all around me. Kace joins me almost immediately, claiming the driver's seat and cranking the engine.

His eyes meet mine and I don't know how it happens or why, but we both start smiling. And with that shared smile, I am lost in this night and this man, into the escape I never allow myself. The rest of the world fades, my fears and worries with it. At least for now.

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chapter twenty-two

I knew Kace lived in Tribeca. I knew that meant money and power.

But when he pulls us to the door of one of the newest, tallest, most unique half-moon shaped buildings, I'm fighting a fish-out-of-water sensation. This is not my world, and yet somehow this man lives inside exactly that: my world. A world, or at least his home, he swears he's invited no one inside, and yet, he's invited me. And I believe him. Perhaps that is yet another of the many ways Kace appeals to me. Despite a recognizable name, he's private. He chooses privacy, thus it feels that he will understand mine.

Kace opens his door. "I'll come around and get you," he says, but already someone is opening my door, the chill of the evening permeating the warm cocoon of the car. A new season is upon us, the old fading into the past, and it feels as if I'm a part of that change. I'm changing. I can feel it happening.

It's then that I realize I'm here, at this place I don't know, without even a full-sized purse. Even my coat is, in fact, Kace's coat. That's how much I've allowed myself to step out of my comfort zone, how much I'm changing. Gio told me this had to happen and then pressed my hand and ensured it did by simply leaving me alone. My brother is a man that pushes limits. For all I know, that was his intent: to push mine. For now, I'd like to believe that to be true. He left so that I could be found. If that's true, I'll hug him and hit him, in that order.

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Shifting, I settle my feet on the ground. Already, Kace is there, towering above me, offering me his hand. I steel myself for the impact of his touch, and when my palm touches his palm, I'm a moth to a flame, and he is that flame. He eases me to my feet and grips the lapels of my jacket, his jacket, and steps in close to me. The cold air swirls around us, but inside this new cocoon he's created there is nothing but heat.

"Once you go upstairs with me," he says, his voice low and rough, for my ears only, "you're all mine. And I don't promise to be a gentleman about it." His hand slides under my hair, his lips finding my ear. "I promise to kiss and lick you in every one of the many places I've been thinking about kissing and licking you since the day I met you."

He's been thinking about kissing me and licking me from the day he met me?

Yes.

Please.

He pulls back to look at me, those eyes, God those eyes, pinning me in a stare. "Unless you'd rather me be a gentleman and take you home?"

Home.

I don't even know what that means right now. And I don't want to think about it. I'm not fooling myself into thinking Kace is my Prince Charming. I'm not fooling myself into thinking I dare to have a real relationship, but I dare to have this night. I dare whatever this night brings.

"I want to be right here," I say. "With you. *Tonight.*"

On the word tonight, his eyes narrow and he studies me, his expression indiscernible, before he leans in and kisses me. "Let's go upstairs." He catches my hand and only then do we step away from the vehicle.

a reckless note

“We’re in for the night,” Kace calls out to one of the two men working the front door.

We’re in for the night.

I could be embarrassed by the way this announces that I’ll be naked with Kace tonight, but I’m not. The way Kace said those words—they fell from his lips as if me being a part of “we” was natural. He didn’t say “I.” That’s what stands out to me.

His arm slides around me and we enter a large lobby that is stunning with brown wood floors streaked with black. Fancy leather seating areas are accented with drop lights above each. A half-moon shaped security desk is to our far left, a wide distance between it and us, but Kace waves at the tall, dark-haired man behind the counter before we cut right and enter a bank of elevators. He punches a button and the doors to the nearest car open.

It’s barely a moment, and I’m inside with him, and he’s punched a code into the panel and then pulls me close, holding his jacket around me. “I like you in my jacket.”

There’s a rough quality to his voice, a warmth beneath the rasp. “I like you in your jacket.”

“I think I’ll like us both better without it tonight.”

“Me, too,” I whisper because my voice is apparently as lost in this man as the rest of me.

His dark lashes lower, sweeping away his expression, but not before I see a hint of something I cannot name, something he does not want me to see.

Already the elevator halts, the doors opening. Kace pushes off the wall he’s using to hold us both up and tangles his fingers with my fingers. We step off the elevator, only a few feet from a double-arched red door. “The entire floor is mine,” he says, punching in a code to a panel on the wall. “Originally the elevator opened

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into my apartment, but I wanted an extra level of security.”

“And a red door is a symbol of protection.”

“And luck,” he says.

“But anyone with your skill doesn’t believe in luck. They believe in hard work, hours and hours of hard work, repeating over and over.”

“I believe in both.” He opens the door and reaches inside, a glow of lights illuminating the once dark space, but he doesn’t enter. He settles back into his place in that hallway with me. And when his eyes meet mine, anticipation burns between us. He’s not touching me and yet, I feel him in every part of me, in ways I didn’t know another human could affect me. “Welcome to my home, Aria Alard,” he says, his voice a silky seduction that strokes every nerve ending that I own.

He motions me forward and for reasons I don’t understand, I read his need for me to choose to enter, for me to choose to be here as if I haven’t already. Or maybe it’s not his need at all. Maybe it’s my need and this man, this virtual stranger, senses that in me. And if he does, he’s right. All my life has been about decisions others have made for me. I need to be in control of my life. I walk into the apartment, onto dark hardwood and directly into a foyer where a dozen teal teardrop lights dangle from the ceiling. A few feet ahead of me is a staircase.

The door shuts behind me and nerves explode in my belly. Kace steps behind me and removes my coat—his coat—and I turn to watch him hang it on a coatrack. The minute it’s dealt with, his attention is fully on me, his expression unreadable, but his eyes—I cannot see the blue of his eyes for the fire. With a predatory energy about him that is wholly man and sex, he closes the space between us, but he doesn’t grab me and rip my

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clothes, though he makes me wish he'd do just that. But that is not who this man is, at least, not in this moment. In this moment, he is control and power, two things that ooze from him as surely as does his desire.

Instead, his fingers twine with mine in what has too easily and quickly become a familiar and welcome gesture. It could be considered almost tender, though there's nothing tender in what brews between us in the heat of this night, nor is tender what I crave. Tender is sweet. Tender is sheltered. Tender is all I have ever known and all I wish to escape. I don't overthink why that is, though I might if I had time. I *don't* have time. He leads me down the ten steel steps and straight into an open room wrapped in floor-to-ceiling windows where an eternal dark sky and ocean seem to surround us now. The living area is to the right of the space, two steps leading to the seating area with a large steel gray high-backed couch and two matching chairs, a luxurious gray rug beneath them all, a chandelier of a violin dangling above a round gray marble table. That chandelier is stunning, while the twinkling dots of color from the city lights brighten the night sky and the miles of ocean with life. What brightens me though, what calls me, is the grand piano to the right of the living area, and the violin displayed on a stand beside it.

I suck in a breath and Kace releases my hand as if he's telling me that I'm free to follow the burn in my belly. And so, I do. I close the space between me and it, stopping in front of the violin, a work of art, the shiny wood a perfect shade of brown flecked with black. And when Kace steps to my side, I whisper, "It's a Stradivarius," incredulous that I am actually standing here with a piece of my history, with a piece of my family.

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“It is,” he agrees. “My favorite of the three I own. The other two are locked in a vault. Touch it if you wish. Pick it up and hold it.”

Yes to all the things he has just suggested. I want to pick it up and hold it but I do not. I resist out of sheer conditioning, taught to run from my past, and from anyone who could connect me to that past. And yet here I am, with “the” Kace August and not one, but three Stradivarius violins, within reach.

Kace steps behind me, the warmth of his body sinking into mine before he even touches me. But he does touch me. The instant his hands settle on my waist, I lean into him, welcoming the power of his body against mine. He’s strong, confident, a man who knows his place in this world and I envy this of him. He nuzzles my neck, goosebumps lifting on my nape. “It’s calling you,” he says, his lips brushing my ear, breath a warm fan on my neck. “I can feel it. You want to know if it’s real.”

I’m suddenly not sure if he’s talking about the violin, but I turn to face him, his touch rotating with me. My hands settle on his upper arms, muscles flexing beneath my palms. “Do you really want to know?”

His hand slides under my hair and settles warmly on my neck, his touch dragging my mouth close to his. “Oh yes,” he murmurs, his breath a warm caress on my cheek. “I’ve learned in life that the façade of truth destroys more than outright lies.”

Never have any words hit me deeper, harder, never have they been more real.

“I stayed away from you for reasons that haven’t changed. I’m not a forever guy. I’m not good for you.”

I almost laugh with the truth in those words. I don’t know what he expects from me, but he’s right. He is everything I’ve been warned against which, if I’m

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honest, only makes me want him more but there is more to this story.

“Nor am I good for you,” I say. “And I, too, have learned a few lessons, like forever doesn’t even exist. And even if it did, it’s too long.”

He pulls back, surprise etched on his handsome face, and something else—there is always something else with Kace that I cannot quite read. I don’t want to read it, either. I don’t want to talk. I push to my toes and dare to be bold when nothing in my life has been bold but death. I don’t want to think about death tonight. I press my lips to his.

For a moment, the briefest of moments, he is stiff, and then there is a low, rough groan that escapes his lips and vibrates against my lips. His tongue licks into my mouth in a sizzling slide that has me moaning. He slants his mouth over mine, deepening the connection, and he kisses me as I have never been kissed. He kisses me as if he is claiming me as if I really am his. And tonight, I want to be. Tonight, I so want to be, but his words come back to me, they stab at me.

I’ve learned in life that the façade of truth destroys more than outright lies.

I don’t need another lie in my life. I tear my mouth from his. “I need you to know that I do want to see your violins. Your Stradivarius. I have a personal reason. But that is not why I’m here now.”

“Why are you here, then?”

“Because of you. Because I need to feel what you make me feel.”

“What do I make you feel, Aria?”

“Free. And alive.”

He doesn’t pull back but he doesn’t move. His lips linger above mine, his body close, his breath warm and his scent spicy. Seconds tick by in which I swear I can

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feel him in every part of me and I crave his kiss. A kiss
that has yet to come and I begin to wonder if it will.

chapter twenty-three

He does kiss me. God, how he kisses me.

His mouth slants over mine, and I swear I feel the deep stroke of his tongue in every part of my body. My nipples pucker. My sex clenches. My body aches. Kace has that power. He kisses me and I melt, as I do now, sinking into the hard lines of his perfect body. No other man has ever affected me this completely, but he does. He owns me with just a kiss, but then, Kace is like no other man I've ever known. His tongue against my tongue seduces, demands—and while there was always a reserve to me in the past, a warning playing in my head, there is no part of me that holds back with Kace. I kiss him with abandon, with passion. I kiss him with my own demand, and then he tears his mouth from mine and backs me up until I'm pressed against his grand piano. "What are you doing to me, woman?" he demands, once again.

"This," I say, pressing my hands under his T-shirt.

In reply, he tugs the shirt over his head and tosses it aside. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I say with no hesitation, my hand caressing the musical notes on his arm, tattoos that say he claims who he is, he embraces who he is. I want this man. I give myself permission to own my desires the way he owns me just by being in the same room as me. And I'm not afraid of that. Not here. Not now. Not this night.

He grips the piano behind me, "Do you know what I want, Aria?"

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There's an edge to him again now, a dark edge that shouldn't appeal to me, but it does, it *so* does. I ask the question he's demanded. "What do you want, Kace?"

"Too much," he says. "*Too much, Aria.*"

He means it. It's in this moment that I understand the hot and cold I've experienced with this man is far more than I realized. He wants me. He doesn't want to want me. He doesn't believe I should be here. My defenses flare and my hand presses to his bare chest. "Why am I here then? You don't want me here."

"I want you, Aria. Very much. *Too much.* That's the point."

"But you don't *want* me here."

He cups my face and stares down at me, the hardness, somehow tender. "I do very much want you here."

"You're confusing me."

"The feeling is mutual, baby," he says, his voice thick with emotion that I don't understand, that I'm not sure I'll ever understand. But it moves me. He moves me and I reach up and cup his hand on my face.

"What are we doing, Kace?" I whisper.

He leans in and brushes his lips over my lips, a feather-light seduction that trembles through me. "This." His mouth closes down on mine and his tongue licks past my teeth, a long, deep stroke that is seduction and power, passion, and dominance. I'm panting when his lips part from mine, linger there, his finger stroking my cheek.

"You, woman," he murmurs, a hint of torment in his voice. "You are going to be my undoing."

I don't know what that means, and I don't have time to analyze it anyway. Not when he reaches up and catches the zipper at the front of my dress, and heat pools low in my belly, every inch of me alive. I am alive

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with this man, a ball of nerves and desire like I have never known. Slowly, so very slowly, he lowers it, but his gaze is locked with my gaze. The zipper slides past my belly and halts at the top of my thighs.

His hands settle at my waist, and he leans in and kisses me. I can taste that dark edge on his tongue again, I can taste the demand, the absolute control. In this moment, I remain acutely aware of how much that control arouses me, how much it calls to me.

His lips leave mine, the hunger in his stare ravenous, but I have this sense that this is still about control to him—he allows me to see this. His control is a need, an absolute need that I understand. It's the kind of need that we aren't born with. It's created. I find myself in contradiction to what I need, in wanting to give him what he wants. I am in fact wet and trembling with the idea of giving him the control.

But that means trust, the kind of trust that has left me alone and that I give no one.

And yet I am here with him. Haven't I already made the decision to trust him, not with my secrets, but with my body?

His hands go to my shoulders, sliding under my dress, scooting the straps halfway down my arms. He captures me with the material, holds me with one hand, but I'm not thinking about being held captive. I'm thinking about his lips lingering above mine again, his breath a warm tease that promises a taste that does not come. He doesn't kiss me. I want him to kiss me, I want it so badly that it hurts.

But still, he doesn't.

He pulls back, his gaze lowering to the swell of my breasts, his fingers stroking the sensitive skin just above the black lace of my bra, my nipples puckering beneath the silk. His gaze lifts to mine and he catches

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the front clasp of my bra. He shoves aside the cups, his attention returning to my breasts, and my lashes lower with the heat of his inspection, a wave of unexpected shyness overtaking me. He has this way of making me feel *owned* and it's intense, so very intense.

My lashes lift and he's looking at me and I'm looking at him, this throb of energy between us, that almost lives, breathes, its own life. "You're beautiful," he says softly, his fingers gently teasing my nipples. Sensations ripple through me, and my lashes lower again. He tugs me hard against him, his cheek pressing against my cheek, his lips at my ear as he says, "So damn beautiful."

That throb between us might be breathing, but I can't breathe waiting for what comes next, still bound by my dress and his hands, incapable of touching him, of anything but what he so chooses. Suddenly, he shifts us and turns me, dragging my dress and bra down my shoulders, and he doesn't stop there. My dress and panties pool at my feet, and his arm wraps my waist as he lifts me and kicks away the material. I'm now in nothing but my thigh highs and heels. And when he sets me down, I catch my weight with my hands, the shiny slick surface of the piano cool beneath my palms. He's hot and hard behind me, the thick line of his cock pressed to my backside.

I'm back to the understanding that he is in control.

On some level, I know that's why I'm holding onto this piano not him. It's back to why his control arouses me and I force myself to be honest, to own my decisions. The truth is, I've spent my entire life clinging to my control. I need an escape that just lets me stop, just lets me enjoy a moment, a night. That need was hidden behind a locked door. Another truth: Kace

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opened that locked door and I can't seem to shut it again.

His hands find my breasts, his lips my neck, and then they're at my ear again. "I want you here," he repeats. "*I want* says it all."

"I want to touch you."

"And you will. Just not yet." His hands, those talented, gifted hands, begin traveling my body: my arms, my hips, the curves of my breasts. Then he is cupping one of my breasts and pinching my nipple, and not gently. I gasp with the bittersweet ache that clenches my sex. My head tilts backward, and he kisses my neck again, cupping my face and tilting my mouth to his mouth, kissing me, all soft and seductive until he nips my lip. I yelp and his tongue strokes away the pinch even as his fingers tug my nipple—both nipples, and not gently—the devil incarnate who offers pain that is somehow pleasure.

"Kace," I pant out, and as if that breaking moment is what he's waiting for, his hands are gone, planted on the piano next to mine.

Desperate to touch him, I start to turn, but he catches my hands with his. "Don't move," he orders softly.

Adrenaline surges through me with the command that is new to me. I've been ordered around by family, by my brother, but never by a man, never like this. I'd never allowed such a thing and yet my thighs are slick and my breasts heavy.

"Aria?" he presses as if he's asked a question. "Don't move. Understand?"

It is a question. He's demanding and asking, and I barely understand this contradiction, but it is somehow perfect. It emboldens me. I've been sheltered and I

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resist crawling back into my hole. I'm not here to live in that hole. I crave this man and all he offers.

"Yes," I say, but I feel my own demand as well, and it fires my tongue. "I heard you. Don't move. Don't touch. Later. Not *too much later*, Kace."

He laughs, low, rough, sexy, the sound sliding through me and settling hard in my sex. I am even wetter now, the ache deeper, the certainty that touching him will answer my body's call. But it is he who touches me. His fingers trail down my sides and over my hips before he cups my backside and then gives one side a smack. I yelp and arch into the touch, but the sting is forgotten when he steps to my side, one hand still holding my backside, the other resting on my belly, fingers low, caressing just above my sex.

He strokes my clit and I gasp as he begins to explore my body. "So damn wet." He sinks two fingers inside me and presses his lips to my ear. "Remember that word, want? I've wanted you like this since we met."

I can't speak, not with his fingers inside me. I pant instead, my chin lowering with the sensations rippling through me. He squeezes my backside, his teeth scraping my neck as he asks, "Do you want my tongue to replace my fingers? Or would you rather have it on your nipple?"

I moan, I can't help it. His touch, the way his fingers explore me, stretch me. His words. His voice. There is a swell in my sex, a promise of a long, ached-for orgasm by someone other than me—it has been *so long*. I fight it. I do, but he cups my face, claims my mouth, and his fingers—God, his fingers. I can't hold back. My body jerks and I shatter. Kace reacts. He turns me into him, deepens the kiss, and strokes me all the way through the quake of my body.

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When it ends as sharply as it came over me, I gasp with just how intense my orgasm was, and he nips my lip and declares, “I’m going to fuck you now.”

“Yes. Please.” It’s all I can say. It’s all I need. I reach for his pants, and I don’t know when, but they are unzipped, he already has on a condom.

“Even polite when you want to fuck,” he says. “I like it.”

He scoops me up, and I’m not sure I’ve ever felt as feminine as I do in this moment, in Kace’s arms as he carries me to the end of the piano, and by the time I’m on my feet again, he’s kissing me, kissing the hell out of me and me him. I am lost and found in this man, no longer the girl in hiding, shoving at his pants. Finally, we get them off, and he sits down on the stool in front of the piano and drags me into his lap. He anchors me, pressing the thick ridge of his cock inside me, thick and hard, filling me inch by slow inch until I have all of him. Until my hands press to his shoulders, and we’re staring at each other. Just staring at each other.

The air charges around us and it’s as if a spark explodes into flames. I don’t know who moves first, but we’re kissing again, his hand pressed between my shoulder blades, supporting me, protecting me, even as he’s rocking me against his cock. Or maybe I’m just doing it myself. All I know is the urgency of our bodies, nothing else.

The build of my orgasm begins again too soon, and I can’t fight it. Not with his tongue stroking my tongue, not with him buried inside me, filling me, pleasing me. I don’t even have the warning I expect. My body doesn’t tense in a prelude to release. It clamps down hard on him inside, clenching around him, darts of pleasure shooting through my body. I bury my face in his neck, the spasming of my sex jerking my entire body. He

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groans, low and guttural, and then he's quaking with me. I try to move, to push him through his release, but I can't seem to control my body. The room fades, and I cling to him, inhaling his scent, trembling with his touch.

When finally, I blink the room back into view, his powerful arm is around me, and I'm staring at the violin, the Stradivarius violin. I'm naked in every possible way with this man.

chapter twenty-four

I have only seconds to feel naked and exposed before Kace brings me back to him, back to a place that is remarkably safe and comfortable. He cups my head, kisses my neck, and says, “Do you like tacos?”

I’m naked on top of him on a fairly small piano bench, with him still inside me, and he’s asking me about tacos.

I laugh and pull back to look at him. “Is that a trick question? Doesn’t everyone?”

“Good answer. I know a great twenty-four-hour place and they deliver.”

Just that easily he tells me he doesn’t want me to leave. And I don’t want to leave.

He stands up and takes me with him, only to set me down on the bench, where he’d just been sitting, his hands at my hips. “Don’t move. I have something for you.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply. He pushes off the bench and snatches up his pants, and turns, offering me a delicious view of his tight, perfect backside, which is tattoo-free, as he pulls them on and then walks around the piano. I drag my knees to my chest, twisting around to follow Kace’s movements, but the violin blocks my view.

The violin.

It’s almost as if my past is chasing me. Maybe it always was.

I shouldn’t be here. I should get dressed and go home.

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Only, I don't want to leave.

Confusion claws at me and already Kace has returned, still shirtless. My gaze rakes over his perfect abs and I'm now aware of the colorful display of musical notes tattooed all over his rock-hard belly, travelling beneath his pants. My mouth goes dry. I want to find out what I missed. I want to lick a path that travels every one of those musical notes.

He settles on a knee in front of me and sets his T-shirt on the bench next to me, his hands cupping my legs just below my knees. Knees that I'm still clutching to my chest, but when Kace gently urges them to the ground, my feet settle on the wooden floor. I'm now naked once more and exposed in so many ways with Kace yet again, but he isn't looking at my body.

He's looking at me and I'm looking at him and I see that edge in him, and not for the first time, I believe it's torment, pain, damage. And I believe he allows me to see this. I believe he wants me to know that I see this. I wonder if it's because he sees it in me as well. My belly clenches with this realization. Yes. I believe he does. He's a man who shelters himself, who doesn't bring people into his life, and that is not about fame. It's about more than that. I'm naked, taking risks with him, but he, too, is exposed. He, too, is taking risks. Maybe neither of us should be, but we can't seem to help ourselves. We can't seem to walk away.

Never before have I felt as if I needed anyone but my family.

But I need this man.

Right now, I need him.

Slowly, his gaze drops, lingering on my mouth and then traveling over my breasts, before he says, "For the record," his hand warm on my bare knee, "I will never sit on this bench again, and not think of you right now,

a reckless note

sitting here just like this, naked and beautiful.” His eyes meet mine and are warm, gentle even, tender. “And I do want you here,” he adds.

My breath lodges in my throat and any thought of leaving fades into the darkness of moments before. He tugs his T-shirt over my head, and I push my arms through the sleeves, the scent of him on my skin, and all around me now.

“Thank you for the compliment and the T-shirt.”

“I’m just speaking the truth, and as for the T-shirt, it was a gift based on being greedy. I was making sure you didn’t get dressed and run.”

It’s a statement that feels layered, punched with measured meaning. “Why would I run, Kace?”

He studies me a long moment, his expression indiscernible before he says, “I do believe the reasons are many.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking about his reasons or mine. Or maybe both? Either way, I remind myself that whatever I felt moments before, he’s made it clear this isn’t more than—well, whatever this night is. Didn’t he? I am not exactly sure what we said now any more than I know how to reply. What is certain is that I’m suddenly cold, the chill of the apartment I was too occupied before now to notice, sending a chill down my spine. I shiver, and Kace reacts, catching my hand, and pulling me to my feet. The next thing I know, he’s scooped me up in his arms again. I yelp and laugh as he starts walking. “What are you doing?”

“The floor is cold and the fire is hot. We’re moving to the fireplace.”

Once again, and oh so easily, he has me laughing. “I could have walked.”

“The floor is cold and you’re in your stockinged feet.”

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Stockings and his T-shirt. While he carries me across the room. I don't know if I could have imagined such a moment. He sets me down in a cozy little sitting area with a gray leather couch, two chairs, and an incredible coffee table that has a wooden violin as its pedestal. All of which are accented with a lighter plush rug. Kace sets me on the couch and grabs a blanket he wraps around me. "Let me get the fire started."

I snuggle into the soft blanket while he walks around the table and to the wall, next to the sleek fireplace that almost seems to float inside encased glass, flipping a switch that ignites a blue and orange hazed flame. Moments later, he sits on the gorgeous table right in front of me, his hands settling intimately on my knees. "Better?"

"Much. Thank you."

"Good," he says and I believe he means it. He's thoughtful, caring, a man who is dark and light, and I crave an understanding of why. I shouldn't though.

"I'm never here", he says. "I forgot how chilly the windows make it in the winter."

He's never here. This should be empowering. He's a temptation that can't last, and yet, somehow the idea of him leaving pinches, no, it stabs at me.

Thankfully he doesn't notice. He snags his phone from his pocket. "I'll order the food. What do you love and hate?"

"Fish. I hate fish."

His eyebrow arches. "Even shrimp and lobster?"

"Yes. I don't eat ocean bugs."

He laughs and it's such a warm laugh. Such a masculine laugh. "We'll have to work on changing your palate."

The statement implies he plans to be around to do so, but that's a contradiction to him never being home.

a reckless note

And as he said himself, he's not my forever guy. I assumed that means, he's my one-night guy. But I'm not running for the door and he's not pushing me to the door, either. He moves to sit next to me and places an order for a "Dueling Dozen" whatever that is, and then sets his phone on the table. "Food will be here in about twenty minutes. I don't have any tequila to go with the tacos, but I have wine."

"Wine is great," I say, and unbidden, I think of my mother and her evening glass of wine, a habit she'd formed with my father and had never given up. There were so many ways I felt her hold onto him. Sometimes I feared too much for her sanity.

"Any preferences?" Kace asks. "Sweet? Dry? White? Red?"

"Surprise me."

"You certainly have me," he says softly, and like so many things with Kace, there seems to be more to that statement than a simple tease, which is why I'm not surprised when he doesn't wait for a reply. He stands and disappears somewhere behind the couch, and I think of all that has transpired with Kace. I think of the torment I've felt and even tasted beneath his surface. I no longer believe that violins and music alone connect us. We are two ships on a stormy sea, looking for our lighthouse in each other. I fear we're really just helping each other crash into the rocky shore. I think he does as well.

Perhaps that is why he believes I will run. I believe I should run, too, but I'm not. I'm still sitting here in his T-shirt, but still so completely naked.

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chapter twenty-five

Kace returns with two glasses of wine in hand and sits down next to me. I let the blanket fall away and accept a glass, our bodies automatically angling toward each other. There's a comfort level between me and this man that defies our short relationship and my normal reserve. "This," he says, offering me a glass, "is my favorite Italian blend. I actually pick it up when I'm in Italy."

It's a reminder of how dangerously close this man is to everything I've been hiding from, but for now, I reject fear. At last, I allow my taste buds to travel there with him. I sip from my glass and indeed the grapes are luxurious. "It's wonderful. Smooth."

"I'm glad you like it." He sips from his own glass and studies me, his gaze far too probing and perceptive for my own good. "When was the last time you were in Italy?" he asks.

This is one of those moments I've trained for. I have stories to tell when asked this question, if ever asked this question, practiced stories meant to save my life, but those stories are lies. And I have told and lived so many lies. I need this time with Kace to be as real as it can be. I just need something real. I can't lie to Kace. And so, I don't. "Too long, Since I was a child." *It's the truth*, I think. It has been too long, but I can't say that to him. Instead, I change the subject. "And you have been everywhere more than once," I comment.

"I have been to many places, not everywhere. And while I'm ready to stay home for a while, there's no

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question that it's been a blessing many don't share to see the world."

I don't miss the humble tone wedged in that statement nor the past tense. "You really aren't going to tour anymore?"

"Contrary to my manager's and agent's demands, yes, I really am quitting. A performance and event here or there for a good cause is fine. A tour, night after night in a hotel, is a whole other ballgame. One I'm done playing."

There is absoluteness to his statements, steel in his jaw, and I wonder if this has been coming for years or decided suddenly, but that feels perhaps too personal a question. Instead, I ask, "Sara said you have several charity shows coming up with Chris?"

"Austin the day after tomorrow," he says. "And then L.A. and San Francisco in two weeks. The final show is a big charity event Chris does at the Louvre Museum in Paris every Christmas."

Unbidden, I feel the bite of him leaving for Europe when I shouldn't. I may not even know him a few months from now and this is a fling, a one-night stand. Sex and pleasure. Nothing more. Afraid he will read this in me, I deliver a well-deserved tease. "You quit the touring circuit as well as I quit chocolate."

He laughs. "I guess that means you never quit chocolate. However, I am quitting the concert circuit. I have nothing booked after that Christmas show. I don't need the money. I have other demands and projects outside of my violin."

"But the violin is a part of you. An extension of your very person."

"It is," he says. "But it's not all I am and I want to play for me. I want to play with passion again and I don't feel I have that anymore."

a reckless note

“You play like you do. So very beautifully.”

“And while I know you mean that, and I appreciate it, it’s become a job. A punishing job on the road with a different bed and time zone every time I blink.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, sipping my wine. “That must be very hard. And lonely.”

“There was a time that everything it is suited me, and suited me well. It’s what I wanted. That time has passed. I’ve been touring since I was ten. I’m thirty-four. It’s time to slow down.”

“Ten?” I ask incredulously. “I didn’t realize you toured that young. Performed yes, but toured?”

“Ten. I was schooled on the road. Everything has been a moving target my entire life.”

I consider his words and don’t take lightly what he has shared with me. He’s a private man, who never speaks of such things in interviews, and while I crave a deeper look beneath his public persona, I’m tentative about pushing him too far. Still, I can’t resist asking, “Did your parents travel with you?”

“I had a handler.”

I blink. “A handler?”

He sips his wine and then downs the rest, refilling his glass as if it’s a topic that requires further sustenance. “Sherry Meyers. I used to joke that she was Michael Meyers’ mother. She was my teacher and guardian who was paid to travel with me. Cranky old woman, too, but she did keep me out of trouble, which I tried to find often.”

My lips curve. “You? Trouble?”

“I was a young boy teased and praised for the violin in my hand. I thought I needed to be tough to prove I was a man. I got in fights, excessively and frequently.”

“Obviously you shifted that energy and became the rock star of violins.”

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His lips curve. “I stopped beating people up, yes. After I broke a bone in my left hand. Had it been my right, I wouldn’t be playing today. Some of us are hard damn learners. But yes, I matured and changed my point of view. And I changed as a person. Mostly. There are still a few people I wanted to beat, but I didn’t.”

I laugh, charmed by the easy conversation, and his ability to self-analyze.

His cellphone buzzes with a text and he snags his phone from his pocket, glancing at it. “That’s security telling me they sent our delivery person up.” He sets his phone on the coffee table. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where would I find a bathroom?” I ask.

He stands and takes me with him, and my God, this easy, casual touch, jolts me with awareness. I am so hypersensitive to this man that it’s insane. He knows it, too. I see it in the burn of his eyes, and the way his gaze lowers to my mouth and lifts. “Other side of the living room,” he says. “But hurry,” he murmurs, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I’m suddenly starving.”

My cheeks heat and he laughs. “You were just naked on top of the piano but you still blush.”

“*You* were naked on top of the piano.”

“And *you* were naked on top of me.”

New heat rushes to my cheeks all over again and he laughs once more, turning me to face in the other direction, and leaning in close, his breath a hot fan on my neck as he says, “You, Aria Alard, are a contradiction I can’t get enough of. Go. Hurry. Before I make them leave the food at the door and take my T-shirt back.” He smacks my backside and I yelp, rushing away as I do, my backside warm, but then, so is my entire body. That smack of my butt was not aggressive or even painful. It was intimate, though. It was daring. He makes me daring.

a reckless note

I have never been daring in my life.

I reach the piano and that beautiful violin that reminds me of things I don't want to think about right now—reasons I shouldn't be here. Reasons I should not be daring. I ignore the instrument and its warning, grab my purse, and leave my dress, hurrying toward the bathroom. The living room is huge, the walk long, but I find the door and enter, quickly shutting myself inside the luxurious bathroom with a dark granite tub and counters. I quickly check my call log in the hopes of something from Gio, but there is nothing. I swallow hard and unbidden anger follows. He's with Sofia, chasing our family heritage. He knows I don't approve. And when he gets back, I will hurt him.

Anger is decidedly more comfortable than fear. I embrace it. I hold onto it. I shove my phone into my purse and set it on the sink. I do what I came in here to do, and wash up, only to groan at my image in the mirror. I'm with the most gorgeous man I've ever met and I have lipstick on my nose and my hair looks like I stuck a finger in an electrical socket. Worse, my purse is so small that I have nothing to fix the damage with me but a stick of concealer and a tiny comb. I put both to use and just in time. Kace knocks on the door.

I open it to find him, and like he was back at Riptide, he's standing right in front of me, his dark hair ruffled, his blue eyes warm. His big body deliciously half-naked. "Just making sure you weren't about to make a run for the door," he says.

He's worried I'm going to leave? Obviously, he is or he wouldn't be standing here. I mean, he said as much, but I didn't think he was this literal but clearly, he was. Kace August is really worried that I will leave. And he doesn't want me to. I don't quite know what to do with that, but stay. "I like your T-shirt," I confess. "I was

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plotting a run for the door before you could take it back.”

He catches my hips and walks me to him. “You can keep the T-shirt if I can keep you.”

It’s teasing, I tell myself, but it doesn’t stop the flutter of my belly. “Do I get tacos in trade?”

His lips curve. “You most definitely get tacos.”

“Well then,” I say. “A T-shirt and tacos. I’m a keeper.”

He catches my hand and walks me to him, the rush of attraction between us in that touch. “I liked you better with the lipstick on your nose,” he says, his voice pure masculine seduction.

So much so that it takes me a moment to process what he’s just said, at which point, my eyes go wide. “You knew I had it on my nose and you didn’t tell me?”

He chuckles and leads me past the living room. “Hard to miss. It was right there on your nose.”

We are teasing and laughing as we return to the living room we’d left, and he convinces me to sit on the rug in front of the table and closer to the fire. Once we’re cozy on the rug, he opens the lid to two boxes of six giant tacos. “Who else are we feeding?” I ask.

“I wanted you to get to try them all.”

It’s a sweet gesture that I don’t miss. “I doubt I can eat even one of those tacos. They’re huge and you ordered twelve.”

“Twelve good bites might equal most of a taco. If you really dig in.”

I shake my head, smiling, and I don’t recall smiling so much with any other human being so easily. He starts explaining all of the sauces and I relax into the next half hour, munching with him, and trying everything.

a reckless note

“One more bite,” he urges after I have had my twelve bites and then some.

I wave him off. “I can’t eat one more bit. I only ate what I did because the food was so good.” I turn away from the table, offering it my side view. “Now I have to workout extra this week and it’s your fault.”

He shuts the box and rotates to face me, one leg up, at my side. “I have a great home gym here that I use every day. You’re welcome to it but I do believe I could keep you otherwise occupied.”

“You *are* bad.”

“I am, Aria. For you.”

My lashes lower and then lift. “So you keep telling me. Maybe it’s me who is bad for you.”

He moves then, dragging me to him, his hand tangling in my hair almost roughly, his lips now a breath from my lips. “You are bad for me, Aria. Because you make me forget things I can’t afford to forget.”

I make him forget.

I suddenly want to make him forget. Greedily, against all that I have been taught all of my life, of what is expected of me, I want to know this man. I want to push him to let me know him.

“I have never needed what is bad for me more than I need it right now,” I dare.

His grip in my hair tightens to a biting, erotic pull, and he drags my head back, his teeth scraping my neck. My nipples pucker as if he’s licked them. My sex clenches with the hope that he will soon be inside me. And when his lips tickle my lips, I am panting as he warns, “You should run away, Aria.”

“Later,” I whisper, and I’ve barely spoken the word before his mouth is on my mouth. His tongue strokes deep and I can taste that dark part of him that he’s warned me of, that dangerous part of him. And God,

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how I want that part of him. Perhaps that part of him is exactly why I'm here. But in his darkness is my freedom. And I have been caged for so very long.

chapter twenty-six

Kace drags his T-shirt over my head and then drags *me* onto his lap. His mouth captures mine, and he is kissing me with a torment, an almost angry demand, and I like it. I like it because it tells me that I have found another piece of the real man, a little piece of the real man he hides behind the rock star and I can't help myself. I want more.

One of his hands splays between my shoulder blades, and the other once again closes around my hair, his grip biting as he drags my head backward, his mouth pressed to the delicate skin of my neck. Goosebumps lift on my skin as he lowers me further, toward the floor, his powerful arms holding me, his teeth scraping my nipple with an erotic pinch he licks away with his tongue.

Now, my hands are in his hair, and I'm the one holding on, and not gently. A low, rough sound escapes his lips and suddenly his mouth is back just above my mouth, but he doesn't kiss me. "You're playing with fire, baby. You know that, right?"

"Am I?"

"You are."

"What if I like it? What if you like it, too?"

For long seconds he holds me there, his big body arched over mine, before he says, "Damn it, woman," his voice sandpaper rough with desire. "You will see, and too soon for me, I know." He lays me back, settles me on the blanket, dragging my legs to his hips, my

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back arching, breasts thrust in the air, his hot stare traveling my body.

He waits for me to ease into the soft rug, to relax before his hands caress up and down my legs, up and down, a promise of every place his hands will soon travel in that touch. "I'm going to kiss you now," he declares, his voice absolute, his thumb sliding into the slick heat of my sex. "So wet," he says. "So ready for my tongue."

My nipples tighten with the words and I bite my lip. No one has ever talked to me this way. No one has ever lit up my body so completely. He slides down lower, his breath a hot tickle on my clit. "You do want me to lick you, don't you?"

I'm already melting for him, melting as I've never melted for a man when his mouth is suddenly closer, his breath teasing my clit, his fingers sliding inside me, driving me wild while his gaze finds my gaze. I gasp and he orders, "Say it. Say you want my tongue on your—"

"Kace," I whisper urgently before he can say the word, my lashes lowering, my hips lifting into his touch.

But already he's denied me that touch.

His fingers are gone, no longer inside me, but my legs are over his shoulders and his mouth is right where I want it. He licks my clit, and I gasp. I've barely recovered when the warmth of his mouth is around me. Already, I'm spiraling inside the pleasure, so close to orgasm, so very close. I want to fight it. I want to slow it down, but I can't. His tongue is everywhere I need it. His hand is on my breast, my belly, my hip. He licks me and licks me and I can't breathe with the demands of my body for release. His fingers slide inside me again and I'm over the edge. I gasp and then tense before my body spasms around his fingers. I tremble and quake

a reckless note

and then it's over. My body that had been tense and arched into him, collapses onto the floor. He eases my legs down and then he's over me, hand on my head. "You were always going to be on my tongue. We both knew it." And then his tongue is in my mouth, the taste of me on his lips. And when he tears his mouth from mine he says, "You, woman," he says, "are trouble."

"I keep telling you that," I whisper, but he's moving, his big perfect body no longer over mine.

I gasp in shock as he rolls me to my belly and pulls me to my knees. He's behind me, his hand on my backside, and when I think he might actually spank me, his palm caresses upward, a path to the center of my shoulder blades, where it rests. He's beside me now, and leans in close, his mouth at my ear. "Stay just like that. Don't move."

"Kace," I whisper, and I'm not sure if it's a plea or a demand.

"I will never hurt you. Ever. It's all about pleasure and escape, about anticipation." His hand slides down my spine and over my backside before returning to my shoulders. "And you look fucking beautiful. *Wait* for me."

I'm exposed, my backside in the air, my weight on my elbows, and my heart is thundering, but I want what this man offers me. I want the escape. I want all of what he offers me. "Yes."

He cups my breasts and then removes his hand from between my shoulder blades, replacing it with his mouth. His lips linger there for long moments, and then he's gone, his touch no longer warming me, the shift in the air telling me that he is now standing.

Now, I'm vulnerable again, exposed, and I can feel the shift of him standing up. I can feel the heat of his stare. I'm reminded of his warnings of himself, but I do

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not feel fear. I'm aroused. I am ridiculously aroused if not nervous. Seconds tick by and the rip of plastic tells me he's putting on a condom, but still, he does not return. More seconds tick by and I can't take it. I can't stay here like this and I rotate to find him towering over me, his cock thick and hard, jutting forward.

"You, woman," he says, coming down on top of me and taking me back down to the floor, "do not follow orders well." His cock settles thickly between my legs, his big body lying heavily on mine.

"Why would I want to take orders?"

"Hmmm," he says, his lips brushing over mine. "Pleasure, baby, remember? Tell me you didn't want me every second you waited for me."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts, Aria. When it's done right, in bed, of course, the exchange of power is an escape."

"For you or me?"

"Both of us or there is no purpose," he says, his fingers teasing my nipples, my lashes lowering and lifting as he adds, "One day maybe you will allow me to show you that."

One day, as if there will be another day.

There are possibilities in those words, we've agreed don't exist but he is kissing me, already he is turning me, rolling me to my side, and he's behind me. He wraps his body around mine, his hand on my breast, and then he's pressing inside me, thick, hard, so very hard. I arch into him, and he thrusts deep. I gasp with just how deep he goes. He cups my face and drags my head back, his mouth slanting over my mouth, his tongue seduces me, even as his cock drives into me.

I can't touch him, but his hands are all over me. His body moves with my body. I lose myself in this man, everything else fading away. We are wild one moment

a reckless note

and tender the next. He said he would own me and he does. I fade into bliss and tumble into orgasm, my sex clenching his sex. His teeth scrape my shoulder, a low groan sliding from his lips as he quakes with his own release.

Long moments later, I relax into him and the warmth of the fire. He is draped around me, holding me, his face buried in my neck. My belly is full and my body sated, the warmth of the man and the fire overwhelming me. I shut my eyes and let it all wash over me, let it all take over me. Let him own me if only for a few more minutes.

Then I'll go home.

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chapter twenty-seven

I blink awake to sunlight and disorientation, the flickering blue and red of a fire in the fireplace in my line of vision. For a few moments, I just stare at it, lost in the flames, uncertain if I'm dreaming, uncertain of where I am. I inhale the scent of spice and man on my skin and reality comes to me hard and fast.

Kace.

I'm at Kace's apartment and it's now morning.

I jerk to a sitting position, and the blanket I don't remember pulling over me falls to my waist, exposing my naked breasts. I gasp and pull it to my chest, and it feels as if I am sitting on the Hudson River, that is how close the water is to the windows, miles, and miles of water. What isn't close, is Kace, who is nowhere to be found. He's not here with me, which means he does not want to be here with me. Or not. I don't know. Right now, my mind is running wild.

Embarrassment is at the core of this, the dreaded morning-after-sex hangover, and it is brutal. It stabs at me and I scramble to my feet, holding the blanket around me, while my gaze darts to the floor by the piano where my clothes should be, beside the piano where we were naked, so wonderfully naked just hours ago. And while memories serve me a mighty experience, my clothes are not to be found. Not even my shoes. My purse, however, is on the piano and I quickly grab my phone, checking for messages, to find only one. It's from Alexander: *Still waiting on that check to be cashed.*

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I don't even think about replying. I grimace and in rejection of Gio's silence, and Alexander's lack thereof, I set my phone on top of my purse, pressing my hand to my forehead. Where are my clothes? And Lord help me, there's still a stupid Goodwill sticker in my dress I couldn't get off.

I inhale the scent of coffee and decide Kace is in the kitchen. At this point, I have two options: I can call out to him or I can hunt him down in a blanket. Hunting him down feels slightly less humiliating, though I really don't want to know how I look right now either. I need a toothbrush and a hairbrush. I need a shower. I need to just get out of here and end this with steamy memories and nothing more because coming here will not be a regret. Overstaying my intended time here might prove otherwise.

I decide calling out is rather offensive and demanding of Kace in his own home. On to plan B. Inhaling a calming breath that is not calming at all, I remember Kace telling me the kitchen was just up the stairs off the main living area. Heading in that direction, I find the gorgeous granite tiled staircase and I start the walk, adrenaline firing through my blood with each of the ten wide steps. I don't know what to expect. I don't know how it will feel seeing him this morning.

Clutching the blanket to me, I plod my way up the remainder of my path, to step into a kitchen of stainless steel and gray granite, the square dark gray island the centerpiece of the spectacular room. Kace is standing behind that island, in the nook of a window, his back to me as he talks on the phone, those miles of ocean before him. He must sense that I'm here because he turns, and the instant his eyes find mine, his gaze does a hot slide up and down my blanket-covered naked

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body. “I’ll be there,” he says, to whoever he’s talking to. “I have to go now.” He disconnects and slides his phone into his pocket, ringlets of damp dark brown hair at his temple, a sexy dark shadow roughing up his jaw, a simple but quite perfect black T-shirt stretched over his chest. Simple is all a man as perfectly male as Kace August needs.

He’s not only perfectly him and dressed, he’s already showered, while I’m a mess in a blanket. “You’re awake,” he says, pressing his hands to the island, all that masculine perfection tuned in on me.

“And without any clothes,” I say, pointing out the obvious.

“I sent them to the dry cleaners. I also left one of my robes on the couch in case you woke up while I was away.”

He sent my clothes to the dry cleaners? I’m very confused about what is happening right now. “I didn’t see the robe. I was on the floor when I woke up and just went straight for my clothes. And when I couldn’t find them, well—here I am in only a blanket.”

His lips quirk. “Yes. Here you are in *only* a blanket.”

He doesn’t say more. He just stands there, staring at me, his expression unreadable and I am suffocating in my naked awkwardness. “When will my clothes be here?”

“Soon. I sent them off early this morning.”

While I slept naked in a virtual stranger’s house, on his floor. I’m not sure what that says about me.

“Thank you,” I say to him. “You didn’t have to do that.”

His lips quirk. “You said that. Twice.”

“I would have just left and changed at home.”

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His gaze narrows, the lines of his handsome face hardening. "Because you wanted to go home last night?"

No, I think. No I did not, but he's impossible to read right now, a deep, dark abyss of unreadable man, and I am drowning in the emptiness. "I didn't plan or expect to stay."

"*Did you* want to go home last night, Aria?"

I'm a deer in headlights, not sure where I'm to run, if I even should run at all. "I should have gone home." *Which is the truth*, I add silently. Even if I do as Gio bid, and fight my way back into my namesake, it's sure to be a dangerous battle I have yet to fight.

He walks around the island and toward me, and my God, the man is sex in denim, boots, and a T-shirt while I am a homeless person in a blanket. It's all I can do to not turn and yes, run. Run until I at least brush my hair. But I don't. I just stand there and already he is close. He stops in front of me, smelling like freshly showered man and delicious spice, but he doesn't touch me. I want him to touch me. I have never wanted a man to touch me the way I do Kace.

He studies me, his expression probing, his voice soft but firm as he asks again, "Did you want to go home, Aria?" but he doesn't wait for an answer. "Because I brought you here. I never bring anyone here," he continues. "And when we laid down in front of that fire together, I *didn't* want you to leave. I thought maybe when we woke up this morning I'd feel differently, but I don't."

The words would please me far more than they should if they weren't hard and sharp. He wants me here, but it doesn't please him. We have this intense, magnetic pull between us, but it doesn't please him. I bristle, confused, embarrassed, certain I have

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overstayed my invitation but survival mode flares heat, and not the heat of passion. The heat of anger. “Don’t sound so angry, Kace. I’m not pushing myself on you. I would already be gone if you wouldn’t have taken my clothes.”

He catches the blanket and pulls me to him. “I don’t want you to leave. That’s what I’m telling you. I’m asking you to stay.”

My throat thickens right along with my confusion. He is close. His mouth is very close. His scent wraps around me. His words and actions dart left and right, cluttering up my mind and emotions. “You’re doing that hot and cold thing again.”

“I assure you, Aria,” he says, his voice low, raspy, “there is *nothing* cold about me with you.”

“You’re confusing me, Kace.”

“Did you want to leave last night, Aria?”

“No. You know I didn’t. We were—it was—”

“Yes, we were and yes it was. Right now, though, I have to go to a meeting with my agent in the Hamptons this afternoon and then it’s straight to Texas for another show with Chris.”

“Oh.” Disappointment stabs me the way embarrassment had minutes before. “I see.”

“No,” he corrects. “You don’t see. I want you to come with me.”

I blink. “What?”

“It will be a fast hop. We’ll chopper to the Hamptons and I have a private jet waiting to take us to Austin. The show is tomorrow night. We’ll be back by Sunday night.”

I’m stunned, my world spinning right and wrong. I want to say yes, but Kace is too close to my past to hide inside his world. And Gio is still missing, but is hiding the way to find him or me?

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“I can’t just leave,” I say, because I have no choice. I need to think about how bold I dare become about my past and my brother.

“It’s a weekend, Aria. I don’t want to leave without you. *Come with me.*”

Come with him. He doesn’t want to leave without me. How do I say no when I don’t want to say no? Will I endanger him? That is my fear, but I quickly reject it. Gio could staff an entire building with the women he’s dated, all of whom are alive and well. Why am I denying myself? Why do I always hide? And the idea of being alone at home, rotting in my own fear, is not a good one. “I have to go by my apartment.”

He arches a brow. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll go with you.”

Something I might call relief I do not expect washes over his face and breaks into one of his perfect smiles. “Good,” he says, stroking my hair. “But there’s no time for you to go home. I called the stores downstairs and they’re bringing you up everything you need, from shampoo to clothes. We’ll have time to shop in Austin tomorrow.”

“No,” I say adamantly. “I need my things, Kace. I have to run by my apartment.”

“Your things will be waiting when you get back. We need to leave no later than two and it’s noon now.”

My eyes go wide. “It’s noon. I slept until *noon*? I never sleep until noon.”

“You did.” He catches my hand. “Come. I’ll take you to my bedroom. You can shower there.”

He starts down the stairs. I tug his arm. “Kace—”

“Need a lift?”

I blink. “What?”

“You do. I can tell.”

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The next thing I know, I'm over his shoulder and he's walking down the stairs. I laugh and just give in to the moment. "Okay!" I say. "I'll walk. I'll stay."

But he doesn't stop. He grabs my purse and phone as we walk past the piano and keeps going. I'm not set down on my feet until we're up a winding set of stairs and inside his bedroom. He plants me on the floor and I lose the grip on my blanket. It falls and I'm naked again.

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chapter twenty-eight

There's no time for embarrassment or any other reaction to my nakedness.

Kace tosses my purse and phone behind me to who knows where, and the next thing I know, I'm not just naked, I'm naked and pulled against him, the hard lines of his body absorbing the softer lines of my body. "My God, woman, you're making me crazy. If I didn't have this meeting—" His cellphone buzzes with a text and then the doorbell rings. "And that," he groans, "is what you call bad timing. That will be your delivery." He snatches up the blanket and wraps it around me but not before his gaze does a sizzling sweep, my nipples puckering beneath his inspection. "I'll be right back," he adds and when he would kiss me, I press my fingers to his lips.

"Oh no," I say, though it pains me to do so. I want his kiss. I want his mouth. "I haven't brushed my teeth," I add. "You cannot kiss me right now. Please."

He tilts his head skyward as if struggling with control before he says, "There's an extra toothbrush and toothpaste in the middle drawer in the bathroom." He closes my hand around the blanket, and releases me, stepping back and giving his jaw a scrub, the rasp of a rapidly thickening stubble against his palm. It looks good on him. Is there anything about this man that I don't find sexy?

Apparently not, because when his hands settle on his hips, my gaze sweeps his tattoos of varied bright colors and I wonder why I have yet to kiss a single one.

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“The delivery should have everything you need,” he says. “I told them to imagine you’d lost your suitcase in a foreign country and I answered a bunch of questions about you.”

“Questions?”

“Hmm. How do you look? How do you smell? How do you taste?”

My eyes go wide and he laughs. “Not the latter two, but,” he steps into me again and presses his lips to my ears, “the answer is, like candy. You look, smell, and taste like candy.” He kisses my neck. “Brush your teeth. I want to kiss you.” He releases me and disappears from the bedroom, *his* bedroom where he’s invited me and now left me to use as I wish.

I am reeling from Kace’s touch and his words, really from every moment with him, and now I am in his most intimate of places. I rotate and survey the room, *his bedroom*. It’s on a corner of the apartment, a half-circle of windows wrapping the space, and delivering the illusion that we are floating on the Hudson River. The bed is to my right, framed by gray wood and a gray cushioned headboard. To my left are a deep navy-blue loveseat and double doors opening to the balcony. And right in front of me, lying on the gray carpet is my purse and phone, which has me laughing. He was so consumed by me being naked that he threw them to the ground.

Smiling now, relaxing into the experience of being here with Kace for the first time all morning, I grab my phone and purse and hurry toward the door opposite the bed that I believe to be the bathroom. Sure enough, I find a room of white tiles swirled with light grays, a giant claw foot tub, and framed by an arched window, with a stunning river view. One I can’t admire at present for good reason. I shut the door and drop the

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blanket, rushing to the separate stall to pee. Once I've washed up, I spy a thin navy robe hanging on the back of the door, and waste no time sliding it around me, only to have my hands swallowed. I try to roll the sleeves up but it's a struggle I barely manage.

Once I can at least mostly find my hands, I head to the double sinks and open the middle drawer. Inside, I find about a dozen unopened toothbrushes that I assume to be for his travels. I think of his talk of retiring from the concert circuit and I believe Kace really is done. I could feel that in him last night and I really can't blame him.

I grab a tube of toothpaste from the drawer and quickly brush my teeth. Opening another drawer, I find face soap and scrub off the mess of my makeup. When I'm done, I stare at the section of the counter Kace obviously puts to the most use and the leather organizer filled with his products. There is one cologne called Juniper Sling by Penhaligon, which I apparently love because the man always smells delicious. Other than that, there's a comb, a brush, and a razor. That is all. Everything in his home is neat and clean, simplistic even. I can't really say that about my bathroom, so I'm pretty sure I've already discovered that we'd never make it as a couple because I'd drive him nuts. Not that we're going to be a couple. He's working me out of his system. And me him, as well. That's all this is. I think. Isn't it?

There's a knock on the door. "Aria? You okay in there?"

I smile all over again and open the door to find him, as I have two times before now, standing right in front of me, his hand on the doorjamb above his head. "Why is it that when I shut a door, you always knock?"

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He folds me to him. “Maybe I just like you better on my side of the door but,” he adds, “I can’t decide if I like you better with my robe on or off. Off wins, as long as you’re naked.” He kisses my hand and then steps to my side to show me a collection of a dozen bags sitting by the bed.

“My God, Kace,” I whisper. “What have you done?”

“I threw this trip on you, so I made sure you have anything and everything you could need.”

A memory of my father leading my mother into a room filled with gifts for her birthday flickers in my mind. He’d loved her. He’d spoiled her. But she hadn’t needed the gifts. She’d just needed him. He knew that, too.

I turn to Kace. “Let me just shower here and I swear to you, Kace, I can run to my apartment and be packed in five minutes. I can wear my dress from last night, and change on the plane.”

“It won’t be ready until Monday and your five minutes to pack will be an hour we don’t have in traffic. If my agent didn’t have a big studio meeting he was flying out to tonight, we wouldn’t have a time crush, but we do.”

“Soon is not Monday Kace.”

He catches my arms and steps into me. “In my defense, I promise you, that they told me later today, but they called and told me a machine went down.”

“Wonderful.”

“I can be. I want you to enjoy everything that’s in those bags. And we can exchange anything that you don’t like or doesn’t fit. I want you to love it all.”

I glance at the bags, one of which reads Gucci and the other, Chanel. “There’s a lot of money in those bags, Kace.”

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He waves that off. "I'm not worried about the money."

"I am." Embarrassment begins to burn in my belly. He saw the Goodwill label. I know he did. "You saw the tag on my dress, didn't you?"

"I want to do this for you."

In other words, he did. "I know you saw the label on my dress. I don't need or want your charity."

His mood spikes in the air and he cups my face. "That's what you think this is?"

My hand flattens on his chest. "I don't spend a lot of money on myself. I don't need you to do it either. I'm here for you, not your money. And why would you even want me here, if you thought it was the money? I need my dress back."

"I want to do this for you," he repeats, his voice steel that is somehow brushed with tenderness. "Not to make you feel obligation or guilt. To make you happy. And because I greedily want you with me."

He wants me with him. There is a rasp to those words, a ring of truth. I believe him. And that matters. "I don't need fancy things. I can't stand the idea of you thinking I'm with you one moment because of your money. I'm not that girl."

Something flickers in his eyes, and he cuts his stare, seconds ticking by before he meets my gaze again. "I *know* that, Aria." His thumbs stroke my cheeks. "I know."

But he doesn't know. He can't know. In that moment, I discover yet another thing I know about this man and he about me. When you hold a prize in your hand, a gift, a wonder of the world that holds value, the entire world wants it and you. There is no peace to be found. Everyone around you could have an agenda, could want what you have. And with that I find yet

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another reason that I am drawn to him. He doesn't know what is real in his life any more than I know what is real in mine. And somehow there is a sanctuary in two like souls haunted by demons of the same evil.

"I'm only here for you, Kace," I say.

"And I am only here for you, Aria."

"Thank you for the gifts."

He studies me for several untold moments, unreadable, he is always so unreadable, and then he kisses me, a slide of his tongue that I feel everywhere before he says, "Hurry and get ready. We only have an hour and a half to get there. That means you have an hour to go through the bags and get ready." He sets me away from him and doesn't give me time to argue. He heads to the door and disappears into the hallway.

He does not shut the door.

And neither do I.

chapter twenty-nine

The bags are filled with everything a girl could possibly ask for: makeup, a flat iron, hair and bath products, several pairs of heels and boots, lingerie, and plenty of clothes. I try not to look at the price tags, but it's hard not to. Just one bra is two hundred dollars, which is insanity. Searching for the items I absolutely need becomes my new goal. The rest can be returned. I start digging through everything and despite the worthy goal, I'm drawn to a Chanel box for one simple reason: my mother loved Chanel, though we didn't have the income for it once we fled Italy. Nevertheless, the brand stirs memories of her and I quickly remove the lid of the box to suck in air, shocked at what I find. It's impossible. I cannot be seeing what I'm seeing, but I am. The purse that I'm staring at is not just a purse. It's pink, a classic recently brought back, but it is also familiar. My mother owned this exact purse. My father bought it for her before we left Italy and even years later, that bag had been in pristine condition. She adored it. It was a connection to him she cherished. She had it with her the day she died and it was never recovered.

Once again, Kace has managed to become a piece of my past. I swallow hard and slide the lid back on the box. I cannot keep that purse for about ten reasons including the price. It's five thousand dollars.

Shoving a hand through my hair, I try to calm my emotions. How did I end up with that purse? How did he buy me that purse? It's a coincidence, of course. It

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really is an old classic recently brought back, a hot item, but God, it's killing me. It's like the universe is trying to tell me something and I don't know what. My gaze sweeps over the bags. There's just so much here, so much money, so much generosity. And something in Kace's reaction to me declining the gifts lingers with me, something beneath his surface, something from his past.

In these bags rest more than fancy trinkets and clothing, for both of us.

I'm not sure what to do with that realization. I just know that I want to understand him. I want to get to know him. Very much, and I can't even seem to muster up an argument or warning that convinces me to walk away from Kace anymore. I don't want to walk away.

I head to the shower, and lather up with a luxurious lily-scented shampoo and body wash. When I turn off the water, the sound of Kace's violin somewhere in the distance sings to me, and my lashes lower, memories flooding my mind. Not since I was a child have I stepped out of a shower to violin music. It was always playing at home. Always. My father loved the instrument. We all did. I still do, but I shove away the past, reminding myself this is the present, and I want to live in the present. For once in my life, I need to live in the moment, if only for a weekend. I grab my towel and dry off, eager to enjoy the luxury of readying myself while he does what we discussed: practices his craft.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in Kace's robe, rather than the pink silk robe I'd found in the bags, and beneath it, I'm wearing a lacy bra and panty set that cost a small fortune. My makeup is done in soft pinks and my hair is flat ironed to a soft brown silk, compliments of amazing products. And Kace's violin notes are still hauntingly, beautifully present. I shut the bedroom

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door to try on clothes because no girl wants the man in her life to see her wearing something that looks horrible. I settle for a pair of dressy black jeans, a light V-neck black sweater, and a beautiful pair of high heel ankle boots. I also yank the tag off the adorable round black Gucci purse which is thousands cheaper than the pink Chanel bag. I have no history with this bag that won't be created this weekend with Kace. I fill the bag with the personal items I will need to have handy, and then pack the Gucci suitcase I've been given as well.

Kace's violin goes silent and I quickly prepare to join him, checking my phone to find it only ten percent charged. I consider dialing Nancy to check on the shop before I lose the little charge I have left, but decide better. I gave her time off for her protection. I'm about to slide it into my purse when it rings with a call from Alexander.

It's a call I'd like to avoid, but he represents money I desperately need. I take the call. "Alexander," I greet.

"Have you considered my offer to work for me?"

"Yes, but being frank here," I say, "I'm uncomfortable. I don't like being in the middle of you and Ed's war. And he was my client first."

"And I'm concerned. You seem to have a pattern of putting yourself in the path of powerful, ruthless men. First Ed, and now, from what I understand, Kace August."

My lips purse. "Please don't go there with Kace again. I'm not a part of whatever squabble is between you two."

He laughs. "Squabble. We have far more than a squabble between us. Let's meet tonight. Let's get this contract signed and if we must, we'll talk about Ed."

"Look, Alexander—" In that moment, I feel Kace, even before I look to the doorway to find him standing

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there tall and strong, his jaw hard, his eyes harder, a pulse of dark energy waving off of him.

“Aria?” Alexander prods.

I wet my lips, cut my gaze from Kace’s, and force my reply. “I’ll call you Monday and we’ll talk about the contract.”

“He’s there, isn’t he?” he asks, the phone line now charged as tense as this room. “You’re with him. Of course. He moves fast.” When I would argue that far from true, he’s already moved on. “When can we meet? Commit to a time and place now.”

Kace must hear the question because his stare sharpens, his expression tightening.

“I’ll call you Monday, Alexander,” I say. “I need to go.” I hang up. “That was—”

“Alexander,” Kace supplies. “I heard.”

“Yes,” I say, not sure why I was even telling him who it was. He knew. I said Alexander’s name.

He saunters toward me, closing the space between me and him, stopping in front of me, his hand sliding possessively to my waist. He pulls me to him. “What are you doing with him?” His voice is low but tight, his mood dark.

“He offered me a retainer for some wine purchases. He’s trying to push out one of my other clients he apparently used to work for. I’m caught in the middle.”

“Because he’s a manipulative bastard. And he wants to fuck you. You know that, right?”

“You’ve said that. And he would say the same of you. He has. You both keep telling me the other one is the bad one.”

His energy jabs at the air. “And you say what, Aria?”

My hand settles on his chest, the thundering beneath my palm defying his cool exterior. He’s bothered by Alexander. He’s bothered by my

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connection to Alexander. “That I’m right here with you, Kace, where I want to be. And I know that he’s manipulative, but so are many people in business.”

“He doesn’t want it to be just business and I have a problem with that. On a personal level, you’re with me or you’re with him. I won’t share.”

“Because it’s Alexander or because it’s me?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Baby, I couldn’t give a fuck about Alexander.” His voice vibrates and softens as he adds, “*You* are what matters to me.”

He means that, I believe. I read that in him, and for that reason, his words matter to me, as does his jealousy. I know what I felt with Kiki. I didn’t like it. “I’m with you. Just you, Kace.”

His hand slides under my hair and he tilts my face to his. “He’s dangerous, Aria, in ways you cannot imagine. Stay away from him.”

I want to give him what he wants, I want to just agree but it’s not that simple, not when Alexander represents resources I need to find Gio. Not unless I can negotiate a better deal with Ed. “I’ll be careful.”

“Damn it, Aria. If it’s money then—”

I shove on his chest and stare up at him. “Don’t say what you’re about to say. I have to deal with this on my own.”

“Because you think I won’t be here to help you deal with it?”

“I’m not going to just take your money. That’s not who I am or who we are. And you won’t be here forever, Kace. You’ve told me that already. You’re not the forever guy, remember? I’m not the forever girl either.”

He cups my head and presses his forehead to mine. “I’m present, baby. I’m present like I have never been with any other woman.”

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My fingers curl on his cheek and I ease back to look at him. “As I am with you, but Alexander is business. I need you to trust me enough to know that I deal with men like Alexander often. I know how to keep them in their lane.”

“If he steps out—”

“I’ll step in, with my knee.”

His lips reluctantly curve. “I believe you would.”

“I would.”

“Good,” he says, but there is still an edge to him, a silent promise he will handle Alexander if I don’t, and I’m not sure if that’s about me or Alexander. Maybe both. For now, we’ve officially moved on when he eyes the bags by the bed. “What’s all that?”

“I took what I need for the weekend.”

He cast me in a keen inspection. “Because you don’t like that stuff?”

My chin lifts. “I have what I need.”

“Which you based on price tag, right?” He doesn’t wait for a reply. He unzips my suitcase, and proceeds the place all the bags inside. Once it’s zipped back up, he says, “Now we’re ready to go.” Already he’s hauling my bag and grabbing his by the door. “Come on, baby. We have a chopper to catch.”

I don’t fight him. He’s won the battle of price tags and done so easily.

Once we’re on the main floor, my gaze shoots to the spot where his Stradivarius had once been and is now missing. “It’s my violin of choice,” Kace tells me, obviously noticing my attention. “It’s going with us.

“That’s an expensive instrument to travel with,” I point out.

“That’s why I pay for security,” he says as we head out into the hallway. “I love the thing too damn much to be without it.”

a reckless note

“Are you auctioning off another instrument at the event like you did at Riptide?”

“I will,” he says, locking up while I help him juggle the bags, “but the donor has handlers for the instrument. I handle my personal instrument and you can finally get a closer look in the Hamptons, if you like. And if you can get past whatever fear you have of it, I’ll even let you touch it.” He says it with a double entendre that has me laughing.

And we’re still laughing about something else when we reach the apartment lobby which has me thinking about just how much I laugh and smile with Kace. Perhaps more than I have in my entire life. But there was truth in his words, too. I didn’t want to touch it last night. Kace brings me closer to my past than I’ve ever been, and for reasons, many that I can easily explain, like danger and my mother’s warnings, I resist going there. But there are other reasons, too, others I can’t explain or quite name.

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chapter thirty

Our mood is light as we step into the elevator, and then the lobby of Kace's building, the call from Alexander behind us, at least for now. We're just exiting the building when a doorman in a blue jacket hands Kace a garment bag. "Exactly what you ordered," the doorman states. "And your keys are in your car. Plus," he holds up a finger and walks to the wooden stand where he grabs something and returns with a bag. "For you, from my wife."

"Oh man," Kace says. "Is this what I think it is?" He smells the bag. "It is."

Steven gives a nod. "Banana bread made fresh this morning."

"Your wife spoils me." He motions between us. "Steven, this is Aria. And Aria, this is Steven. He's been here thirty years. His wife needs to have her own bakery. You're in for a treat."

"I can smell it," I say. "It smells delicious. And we haven't eaten all day."

Steven beams. "So happy we came through for you then, miss."

"We're gone for the weekend," Kace informs him. "But tell Sharon thank you."

"Safe travels, you two," he calls after us as we head for the car.

I wave at him but the "we" in that statement Kace just made is presently doing funny things to my belly and chest. I've never been a part of a "we." Is that what we are now? Have Kace and I become a couple?

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Almost as if he reads my mind, Kace catches my eye and winks before bringing me into the story he shares with Steven. “His daughter is an aspiring violinist. I wrote a letter of recommendation for her application for Julliard.”

There’s a pinch in my chest over a dream that was once mine, but that was a lifetime ago, a dream I really do not crave anymore. It’s family I crave. And Kace. Somehow the hollow of loss is gentler when I’m with him.

“Then she’s good,” I assume.

“Very,” he confirms, as yet another employee rushes to help us with our bags, including that garment bag, that has me rather curious.

“I got this,” the twenty-something man says. “You violin players need to protect your delicate little hands.”

“Delicate hands, big bow,” Kace jokes.

Obviously, it’s a dirty joke that leads to further exchanges between these two, who are clearly friendly. I laugh with them and decide that each moment I share with Kace, he becomes more and more human. As Sara said, he’s a man, just a man, and it seems Kace himself doesn’t forget this. I shouldn’t either.

Soon we are in his fancy sports car, my curiosity about the garment bag sliding away, with my excitement for the trip, but Kace doesn’t make any attempt to drive away. He pulls his phone from his pocket. “I’ll order coffee on my app if you’ll run in and grab the order so I don’t have to park?”

“Deal,” I say. “Coffee sounds wonderful.”

“Same thing you ordered at the bakery?”

“You remember what I ordered at the bakery?”

“You ordered my drink, baby. Yes, I remember.”

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My lips curve. “Yes. I want the same thing as at the bakery.”

He punches in the order. “We have about five minutes. You have to try the bread. And you have to be starving. I damn sure am.”

“I am, but don’t we need to move from in front of the building?”

“The perks of being a massive tenant are sometimes worth taking advantage of. They’ll tell us if it’s a problem and we’ll move.” He grabs a napkin and loads it with a slice of bread for me and then does the same for himself. “Try the bread.”

We both take a bite and I moan my approval. “It’s delicious, and I really was starving.”

“It is,” he says, downing half a slice before he cranks the engine. “But we’re going to choke if I don’t get us that coffee. We’ll grab some real food when we land before I faceoff with Nix.”

He places the car in drive, and by the time we’re idled in front of Starbucks, my bread is gone and so is his. “I’ll be back,” I say. “If I’m not, I made a run for it with the coffees.”

To my surprise, he catches my arm. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t run, Aria.”

I rotate to face him and press my hand to his face. “Are you going to give me a reason to run?”

“You have no idea.”

“At least wait until I have another slice of that bread. And coffee.” I kiss his cheek. “Please.”

He cups my head and gives me a toe-curling kiss before he says, “Get the coffee and bring you sweet little ass back here now.”

My lips curve, and this time when I reach for the door, he lets me. But as I steep into the chill of the air,

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I wonder what it is he feels I'll discover, what he believes will make me run, because it's clear there's something there. But then, I have my own demons. Maybe it will be him who runs, not me. For now, I set all that aside.

I hurry to grab our order, and I'm back in a flash. "How many slices of bread did you have in the three minutes I was gone?"

"One more," he said. "but I'm not done."

I laugh and hand him his coffee. He sips and sets it down before he revs the engine and we're on the road. I spy a charger and plug in my phone while he maneuvers us through traffic, mastering the car with the same ease he does his violin. Man and beast. They go together.

"My older brother, Gio, would love this car," I say, eyeing Kace as he turns us down a new road. "You'd like my brother. He'd like you."

He casts me a sideways look, a smile in his eyes. "Introduce me and we'll find out."

Just that easily, he tells me that the weekend isn't just a weekend to him. It doesn't end here. Unless it does, I caution myself. Only the weekend will really tell. "Gio's off hunting treasures," I say. "He and I don't just own the business together. We own the building. We bought the place five years ago and had the upper level above our business renovated into two private apartments, so we each own one."

"I consider my band to be family and I pretty much lived with them for years. I love those guys. I'll miss seeing them on the road."

"A change of heart already?"

"No," he says firmly. "They're family. That won't change because we aren't touring anymore. You'll see why tomorrow in Austin." He cuts down yet another

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street and glances over at me. “What am I sensing when you talk about your brother?”

“That obvious, is it?”

“To me, baby, but we’ve spent enough time together now that I might not know what’s beneath your surface, but I know it’s messing with you.”

“I’m just not happy with him right now. He’s not just gone. He’s not communicating at all.”

“And he normally communicates?”

“Unless he believes what he hunts puts him at odds with me. And by that, I don’t mean something illegal, but high value, yes. And high value comes with danger at times. He’s driven. If a client wants something and it’s worth a big payday, he takes risks.”

“And what does he want right now?”

“I don’t know his exact obsession,” I say, “but in this case, I’m not sure it’s an object. I’m fairly certain her name is Sofia.”

He cast me a sideways look. “Ah,” he says. “That’s why you asked me about Sofia. Is she a client?”

“All I know is not much,” I say, biting back my urge to say much more. I’ve only known Kace for a few weeks. I don’t know him well enough to trust him. Not with this. Not yet.

“You said she told him about the auction.”

“Or maybe he told her. I could have it backwards. I know they communicated about the violin. I know they’re romantically involved.”

“Perhaps she’s associated with the seller.”

“Who sold a fake instrument? That doesn’t make me feel better about him and her.”

“Obviously you’re worried about him with her. I’ll ask around and see what I can find out about her.”

“No,” I say quickly, aware now that I’ve said too much, I’m afraid of bringing attention to us we both

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don't need. "No," I repeat, "I don't want Gio to feel that I don't trust him, but thank you. And I admit to being a bit protective, but if you knew Gio, you'd think that was silly. He's a player who is off doing what players do. And if anyone can take care of himself, it's my brother."

"For now," he says, pulling us into a small airport, "you can get on a chopper with me and forget all that worry." He pulls us into a parking spot and kills the engine. "Our adventure begins. You can tell Gio all the G rated moments when you both get home."

My mind shifts in rapid speed from worry over Gio to me, the control freak, about to get in a helicopter. Nerves flutter in my belly and by the time he's at my door, I've already opened it and I'm standing up. "I've never been on a chopper. I'm suddenly very nervous."

He catches my hip and walks me to him. "Don't be nervous. I've been on hundreds of choppers. We'll be perfectly safe. Trust me, baby. I'll take good care of you." There is that crazy mix of wicked tenderness to those words that pool heat low in my belly and stir emotions in my chest.

He'll take care of me. On some level, I crave someone to take care of me and I believe that stems from memories of my father taking care of us. But then he was gone and my mother was alone. It's a dangerous thing to allow someone to take care of you, to love them and depend on them. As Kace and I walk into the airport, this feeling of being together, of being a couple, is in the air, I remind myself that he's not a forever guy. I'm not a forever girl. And nothing is forever anyway.

This is just a weekend.

I'm going to enjoy it.

Then I'll go back to reality, and I can figure out what that means.

chapter thirty-one

Once we're inside the airport building, it's clear the entire crew knows Kace, and knows him well. It's also clear that they like him and he likes them. The only person I've found to hold Kace in negative regard is Alexander, and I can't help but wonder what that's all about. For now, Kace introduces me to everyone we come in contact with, and it seems there is never a moment that he's not touching me.

It's not long before Kace is helping me into my seat inside the massive chopper and leaning across me to latch my seatbelt protectively. Everything about him right now is protective, and that I can't help but welcome. There is a warmth between us that expands each moment, a pull like nothing I have ever known. The chopper roars to life, and all that is forgotten. There is only the control freak in me that my mother created, that now has no control. I am freaking out. Kace grabs my hand and speaks to me through the headset I'm now wearing.

"Easy, baby. Close your eyes. Then you're not second-guessing the pilot."

"I can't do that."

"You can. It'll help. I promise."

We lift off and his arm is around me, pulling me close. I do exactly what he says. I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in his chest, my fingers curled around his T-shirt. Once we level off, he convinces me to open my eyes, and I surprise myself by relaxing into the ride and the miles of cityscape and beautiful water below.

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Landing sets me off again and I'm back to clinging to Kace.

Once we are on the ground, Kace helps me from the chopper and into a chilly afternoon that seems to be growing chillier, catching my hand as we hurry inside. "Winter is here," I declare as we step beyond the doors, a heater blasting us. "And I didn't bring my coat. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You won't need it in Austin," he says, "but I've got us both covered while we're here, which won't be long. I moved our flight up so we can have two nights in Austin."

"I thought we were staying here tonight?"

"We were, but my agent sent me a text while we were in the air. His meeting was cancelled. That means he'll be here, where he will pursue me the entire time we're here. I'm not in the mood and neither are you, I promise you." Our bags are handed off to us and Kace grabs the garment bag Steven handed him at the apartment, that I now see has a Chanel logo on it. He unzips it to reveal a knee-length black trench. "They didn't have your size at the store, so they had to have it delivered from across town." He pulls it from the bag and holds it out to me. "Come," he orders softly. "Let it keep you warm until I can later."

I step in front of him but I don't turn. "You're doing too much for me, Kace. I don't need you to do this."

"I do nothing I don't want to do, Aria and when it comes to you, 'I want' pretty much means everything. Now, turn around and put this coat on before I starve to death right here in front of you and I'm close. It's about to get brutal. Melting clothes. Screaming. Me in a puddle of mush on the floor."

I laugh, despite myself. This man undoes me in every way. I push to my toes and kiss his cheek. "Thank

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you,” I say, and then slip my arms into the coat, which is a perfect fit.

“It’s perfect and beautiful,” I say, snuggling into it. “Thank you. For it and not melting into a puddle on the floor.”

His mood has done one of his one eighty shifts. He doesn’t laugh, instead he grabs the lapels of the coat and tugs me close. “I don’t want your thanks, Aria, but I do want *you*.” He kisses me hard and fast. “Just you. You understand?”

“Yes,” I say, not sure where this dark side has come from nor do I fight it. “And I just want you. Do *you* understand?”

Seconds tick by before he smiles, a whiplash shift of mood. “You are never what I expect.”

“Says Mr. Wickedly Intense who suddenly breaks out in a smile.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

There is an easy playfulness to him now that I eagerly embrace. “I’m sure you do.”

His cellphone rings and once again his mood shifts, his expression tightening. “And that will be my agent, who is exceedingly eager to harass me.” He releases me, snagging his cell from his pocket. “Yep. It’s him.” He hits decline and kneels next to his suitcase and proceeds to stuff my garment bag inside while removing his favored light brown leather jacket. Once he’s shrugged it on, his arm slides around my shoulders. “Off to war,” he says. “The battle will be brief but bloody.”

“That bad?”

“Yes.”

He offers nothing else, but he doesn’t have to. He’s made up his mind. It’s in his voice, in his entire demeanor. Kace August knows what he wants and he’s

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going for it. He's not afraid of change. He's not afraid of the future. Just like Gio, and in my heart I know that I pushed Gio away by trying to stop him from what he craves. He wants what is left of our family. And the truth is, so do I.

chapter thirty-two

Kace has a driver named Nelson waiting for us outside the airport and it's not long before I'm watching them load the back with our bags. "Do you have a house here?" I ask.

"Hell no," he says, stepping back to allow the driver to shut the trunk. "I can't stand the pompous attitudes on the island. Nix knows it, too, but he was putting off this conversation. I need it done before someone promises something I end up stuck with. What are you hungry for?"

"Anything but fish."

He laughs. "Right. No fish."

"How about homestyle cooking? Mac n' cheese. Potatoes. Chicken fried steak."

"You had me at the mac n' cheese."

"Mac n' cheese it is then," he says, eyeing our driver. "To Ruby's please, Nelson."

"Ruby's it is, sir."

Fifteen minutes later, we're at a wooden table, eating bread and drinking sweet tea, with our order already placed.

"You don't live here, but you certainly seem to know how to choose the right spot for good food. The bread is delicious."

"I've spent enough time here to know I don't want to spend time here unless I'm eating."

Our food is set in front of us, which for me is a dinner portion of mac n' cheese, which is gigantic and bubbly with cheese. "It looks delicious."

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“It is,” the waitress assures me.

Kace smiles and he digs into his chicken fried steak while I do the same with my mac. We’re a couple of bites in when he catches my hand and stares down at the sunflower ring. “Girasoli, or sunflowers. The fields are filled with them in Tuscany. You’re Italian, aren’t you?”

“My father was Italian. My mother was American. He gave her the ring. They honeymooned in Tuscany.”

He settles my hand on the table, studying me a moment before he says. “They’re gone.”

“Yes.”

“As are mine,” he says, and rather than push me for answers, he offers his own. “My parents were killed in a plane crash twelve years ago. I was twenty-two. I wasn’t close to them, but there is something—” he hesitates, “safe about knowing your parents are alive.”

I stare down at the ring a moment, memories telling stories in my mind, knots in my belly as I look at him, as I offer my own answers. “There is. You’re right. But I was close to my parents. Very close. My father has been gone since I was eleven,” I say, hoping he won’t push for more and moving on to offer more about my mother for that very reason. And because this is Kace. I want to tell him. “My mother was mugged and killed in the city when I was eighteen. She was a merchandiser for Macy’s. She was only a few blocks from work when it happened.”

“And now it’s just you and Gio, and he’s missing.”

“I don’t know if he’s missing. The asshole just won’t communicate.”

His cellphone rings and he curses. “Sorry, baby.” He grabs it from the table to eye the number. “It’s Nix.” He declines the call and punches in a text message before he sets his cell back down. “I told him I’m here. That

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will be enough to calm him down.” He glances at my food, of which I haven’t touched much. “Eat. It’s a long flight out of here, though we’ll have snacks on the plane. Have you ever flown private?”

“Only commercial,” I say, picking up my fork. “Prior to my travels with you, I’ve been here and as you already know, to Italy. That’s it. Actually, Vegas, too, once when I was in college. Have I mentioned I fly in planes about as well as in choppers?”

He laughs and for the rest of our meal, I tell him about my freak-out over the air conditioning smoke in the plane on the flight to Vegas. “The flight attendant hated me by the time we landed. And I drank a Bloody Mary on the flight home and fell asleep. I think you might want to get me drunk on the way to Austin.”

“I’m sure I can find a way to keep your mind off the flight,” he says, mischief in his eyes.

“You’re bad.”

“I keep telling you that and here you are. You don’t listen.”

“I hear you. Every word. Every time you say it. In fact, you don’t get to keep saying it anymore. You are bad. You will make me run away. Spoken. Heard. No more warnings.”

He leans forward, close, his hand on my hand, and the room fades, the clink of glasses the sound of voices, gone, leaving only me and him. “Or else what?” he asks.

“Or else I’m going to think you want me to leave.”

“I don’t,” he says. “I *don’t* want you to leave.”

“And I don’t want to leave. Whatever it is you think—”

“I know. What I know is a problem.”

“Just tell me then. Put it behind us.”

“No,” he says. “No.” The words are steel, the air spiking with his shift of mood.

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The waitress sets our check down, breaking the spell between us. I reach for my purse. Kace catches it in his hand. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You have spent so much money on me. Let me buy lunch.”

“No. I invited you. This weekend is on me.”

“Kace—”

“I have more money than I can ever spend. I choose, and want, to spend it on you.”

“Thank you, Kace.”

“I told you. It’s not your thanks I want.” The words are still hard, but he kisses the sunflower on my hand, and I have this sense of me being a sunflower, floating in a perfect blue sea of his making. I will eventually drown, but every moment before will be a perfect drink.

chapter thirty-three

Kace and I bundle up and then exit the restaurant. Nelson meets us at the front of the Escalade and Kace hands him a card. “That’s where we’re going.”

Nelson gives a nod of agreement before Kace and I head toward the rear passenger side door. “Wait,” I say, halting as Kace opens the door for me. “What is the plan for me when you’re with Nix?”

“You’re with me baby. His house is a few miles down the road. We’ll be in and out, in half an hour, if I have my way.”

I blink, not sure why this hasn’t hit me before now. “I’m going with you to Nix’s house?”

“Yeah. That’s the plan. It won’t take long.”

“Kace no. That is going to be weird. I can’t intrude on your agent in his home.”

“Baby, it’s not a big deal.”

“You said yourself that he’s not overly pleasant. I’ll stay here and wait.”

A gust of wind lifts my hair and shoots cold air right down my collar. I shiver and hug myself. “Climb in,” Kace orders quickly. “We’ll talk inside where it’s warm.”

“I’m going back inside. I’m respecting you and your business. It’s not a big deal. Hot coffee and some of that cake I saw them passing around works just fine for me.”

He studies me for several beats and then snakes his phone from his pocket. I grab his hand. “What are you doing?”

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“Cake sounds good. I came to the Hamptons. Nix can meet us here.”

“No. God, no. I’ll go to his place. After all you’ve done for me, I do not mean to be difficult. I’ll be fine.”

Kace’s hand slides under my hair to my neck. “Me buying you things is not meant to make you feel required to endure something uncomfortable. That’s not who I am. That’s not who I want us to be.” There is an urgency to him that isn’t just about me and now. I’ve hit a nerve I do not understand, but it’s raw and real. “That was never my intention,” he adds. “My money does not buy your agreement.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t buy me. Being considerate is just me. And not for one second did I feel that you were using money to control me, Kace. You want me to go, though. I will. Let’s go to him.”

“Yes, I want you to go, but I don’t need you to do this for me to be good with us.”

“Like I do not need you to buy things for me to be good with us. But you wanted to do those things for me. And I want to do this for you.”

He studies me again, eternal seconds passing before his mouth closes down on mine, a rough passion in his kiss that I want to read, but too soon, it’s over. He tears his mouth from mine, and orders softly. “Climb in, baby.”

This time, I don’t hesitate. He wants me with him and I’m going with him.

I settle into the backseat and he follows, shutting us into the warmth of the heater Nelson has left cranking out air. Kace’s hand settles on my leg, possessiveness in his touch. Once again, I think that I really do have this sense I hit a nerve with Kace that I’m not well-versed enough on this complicated man to understand. But I want to understand him. I only know that I must,

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that it feels necessary. So quickly, too quickly perhaps, Kace is becoming a part of my life. He's becoming important to me. And I'm not blind to the message he's sending me by taking me along for this meeting. We're building a bond. And the more he pulls me into his life, the more I have to come clean about mine.

The idea weighs on me, but not for long. The drive is short, and already it seems, as Nelson slows and turns into a property, we've arrived at Nix's place.

"It's beautiful," I say, as I bring a giant mansion on the water aglow in lights, into view.

"As would be expected," Kace says dryly. "He's a filthy rich bastard who pimps me out no more."

"Ouch," I say. "That sounds like acid in the water."

He shrugs as the vehicle halts in the driveway. "I actually like the guy. He's just not listening right now, which is pissing me off."

He reaches for the door and I catch his arm. "I know we've talked about me being here being fine, but it really seems like Nix will think I'm a distraction."

"There's nothing to distract from, Aria. I've been telling Nix and Bear that I'm done for a year. I gave them both notice. Bear gets it. Apparently Nix just needs me to look him in the eyes and say it." He opens the door and steps outside, helping me out, only to waste no time once the door is shut. He leans into the Escalade, speaks to Nelson, and then he's lacing his fingers with mine, pulling me toward the long staircase, which leads to double red doors.

"There are those red doors again," I say.

"Don't read into them with him. They came with the house, and the zip code he wants on his resume."

Another comment that suggests Kace isn't Nix's biggest fan. "Will your manager be here? He will be, right?"

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“Nix called Bear and told him this was between me and him. I’m not happy about the fact that Bear listened.”

“And I’m here? Kace, if he didn’t want Bear here, he won’t want me here.”

“Nix’s wife Becca will be here. There’s no reason you can’t be here. You’ll like Becca. You can chat with her if he and I need privacy. And have a drink to help you with your nerves before the flight.”

“I’m not sure we want me drinking around your agent,” I say as we halt at the door and he rings the bell.

Kace winks. “I’m pretty sure Nix doesn’t stand a chance with you drunk or sober.”

The door opens and a pretty forty-something blonde in a pink dress with gentle blue eyes greet us. “Welcome, Kace,” she says before her eyes fall on me. “And you must be Aria.”

“Hi,” I say, confused by the familiar greeting.

Kace wraps his arm around me. “Did I mention Bear has a big mouth?”

“He does.” Becca laughs. “And I used to date Bear, so his lips flap more freely with me.”

I blanch and she laughs. “I never get over people’s reaction. Go ahead. Say what you think.”

“No wonder Bear isn’t here.”

She and Kace erupt in laughter and she backs up to allow us to enter, while Kace’s hand on my lower back guides me forward.

“Nix is on patio,” Becca says as we join her in the foyer. “We have the fire going and a bottle of wine open and breathing. I’ll meet you there.”

Kace lifts a hand her direction and reaches for my coat, as she fades down the hallway and disappears.

“She dated Bear?” I ask as he hangs it on a rack and shrugs out of his own.

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“She and Bear were broken up when she met Nix, but it’s awkward. Bear still loves her and Bear and Nix are like night and day.”

“And she jokes about it?”

“That’s not my read on her. I think it’s the elephant in the room she tackles before it tackles her.” He catches my hand. “Let’s get this over with, baby.”

I nod as he leads me through a luxurious house, with steeped ceilings, and an open-concept living room of creams and whites that is both beautiful and sterile. We exit to a much more cozy patio with two couches facing each other in front of the fireplace.

Nix and Becca occupy one of those couches, standing as we walk their direction, my attention focused on Nix, the man of the hour we’re here to see. He’s tall, lean, and dressed in expensive slacks and a button-down. His hair is red, and while his features are sharp, what he lacks in good looks, he gains in overt confidence.

Kace and I step into the space across from them—woman to woman and man to man, but none of us sit.

“Nix, this is Aria,” Becca says, motioning between us.

“Hello, Aria,” Nix greets, and his attention doesn’t just land on me, it thuds heavily. “You are,” he adds, “quite *beautiful*.”

It’s a biting compliment I don’t accept blindly. “I have never been called beautiful with such anger. Well,” I amend, “except maybe by Kace.”

Kace laughs and wraps his arm around me. “Only when I was resisting your charms, baby, and that’s what he’s doing right now.”

Nix scrubs his jaw. “He’s right, Aria. I’m thinking I’m fucked because with you state-side, he’s not leaving.”

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“Who says I wouldn’t take her with me?” Kace challenges. My gaze jerks to his and he adds, “If you’d agree. I’d take you in a heartbeat. You already know that.”

Stunned, my heart is racing as Becca says. “Let’s sit and drink wine. We could all use it.” She takes the lead and sits, lifting a bottle of red wine that she begins pouring in four glasses.

Kace tugs me with him onto the couch. Nix grimaces and sits. “I can see now that you’re really done, Kace.”

My defenses bristle. “Not because of me. He was done when he met me.”

Kace kisses my temple. “Relax, baby. He knows.”

Nix surprises me by confirming Kace’s statement. “I know,” he agrees, eyeing Kace. “I’ve know. I just denied that fact, but no more.”

Becca offers me a glass of wine that I eagerly accept. I’m going to need it to get through this meeting and the flight. She makes sure everyone has wine, and once we’ve all sipped at least once, Nix is already changing his tune. “That all said,” he begins. “Pepsi will sponsor a final run if you—”

“No,” Kace says, his tone cool, rather than heated. “And no. You make a fortune off me, Nix. You don’t need the tour money. You’re just being greedy.”

“We make a fortune on the tours. And everyone with an agent needs a greedy agent. If they don’t have a greedy agent, they’re up shit creek with a fucked-up boat. I’ve made you a shit ton of money. You’ve made me a shit ton of money. But I get it. You inherited a fuckload of money from your parents. You’re rolling in cash. You don’t need that schedule. You write hit songs. I’m surprised it didn’t happen sooner.”

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Kace inherited a ton of money? I try to remember anything I've read about his parents but the answer is, not much. It's like they existed outside his world.

"And on a separate note," Nix says. "that stock you hooked me up with killed it, and I mean *killed it*. I made a fortune."

He and Kace begin talking about that stock and Becca leans my direction to whisper, "Forgive Nix. He's got a dirty word in his mouth every second of every day."

"I live in New York. The f-word is just another version of 'hello' or 'good morning.'"

She smiles and for the next forty-five minutes, we all drink wine and fall into a surprisingly easy conversation, everyone telling me funny stories involving Kace's years on tour. I end up liking Becca quite a lot and as for Nix, him, too. Mostly.

"It's time for us to head out," Kace says, sliding his hands over his knees and turning serious. "I'm out, Nix. Don't commit me to anything tour-related or we will have a problem."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You've done it before."

"Not when I know it's really not what you want. Write me some songs. Let me sell them and make us some more money."

Kace nods and we all stand up, but he isn't quite done. "One more thing," he says. "If you get a lead on another Stradivarius, I want it."

My attention perks up at this unexpected turn.

"What happened to the one at auction you were attending?" Becca asks.

"It was a knock-off," Kace replies, and eyes Nix. "I'm on the hunt."

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“I actually can come through for you.” He pulls a card from his pocket, leans over the table to write something on it, and then hands it to Kace. “Call him. He did a bad trade that burned him. He wants to sell. He needs the cash.”

“Once again you come through, man,” Kace says, shaking his hand.

Becca and I exchange numbers and a few minutes later, Kace and I are bundled up again, back inside the Escalade, with Nelson already driving us toward the airport. Kace hands me the card. “Make your buyer happy.”

I blanch and turn to him. “What?”

“You lost a sale when the violin at Riptide was a fake. A big sale. But you’d better get ten percent of the process which will make you rich. If you don’t get that from your buyer, I’ll buy it and pay you ten percent.”

I study him, searching for answers in his face. He’s given me a gift, because, no, I don’t have a real buyer, and guilt stabs at me over that lie between us, but yes, I *can* find a buyer. It’s dangerous for me to connect myself to a Stradivarius, but it would allow me to fund a real search for Gio. His offer is incredibly generous. “Why would you do this, Kace?”

He folds me close and lowers his voice for my ears only. “My money isn’t going away, baby. If you have your own, you won’t feel as uncomfortable with mine. It’s the freedom to do anything you want to do. Anything *we* want to do.”

I’m stunned by his generosity. “You are like no other man I’ve ever known.”

He cups my face. “And you, Aria, are like no other woman I’ve ever known.”

I don’t know what is happening between me and this man, but I know I can’t walk away. And I know I

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can't go much longer without telling him who I am.
Who I *really* am.

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chapter thirty-four

The plane is luxurious with tables, couches, and leather recliners. As the only guests on board, Kace and I are free to choose our seats and we settle into a couple of the recliners near the rear of the plane.

“It’s later than I’d hoped,” he says, eyeing the silver-rimmed face of his watch, the thick leather band so very rock star-ish, but then, everything about this man has become a rock star to me. “We’re going to be lucky if we get to the hotel by eleven,” he adds, “but we have sandwiches in the fridge, chocolate, and,” he twists open a mini bottle of Bailey’s and pours it over ice for me, “something to calm your nerves.”

“I darn sure won’t turn it down, either,” I say. “Did flying ever bother you?”

“I was all over the place so young it was like riding in a car, but here’s how I know you can beat this.”

“I’m glad one of us knows. I’m listening eagerly.”

“Control freaks fear what they can’t control, but they also insist on finding a way to control what feels uncontrollable.”

I snort. “I’d have to become the pilot to make that happen and then I’d worry about the engine.”

“You have to find a way to conquer your own mind, not the plane.”

The engine roars to life and I down the drink. “More, please.”

He laughs, and God, the man has such a deep, sexy, masculine laugh. And nice lips. I really like his lips. He unscrews another mini bottle and empties it into my

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glass. "Talk to me and keep your mind off of the takeoff."

"Okay," I say. "We'll give this a try. When is the show?"

"Seven tomorrow night. And unless you're in a rush to get home, we can spend some time in Austin on Sunday and fly back late."

"I've never been to Texas. I'd like that."

His lips curve, his eyes warm. "Then it's a plan. You and me and Austin."

"Yes," I say. "You and me and Austin."

And oh so easily, Kace August has become exactly that: my plan. But my plan for what? *Too much, too soon*, I think. Not enough, I amend. I don't think I can get enough of this man. The plane begins to burn a path down the runway and I set my glass in a cup holder. Kace reaches over and settles his hand on my belly. "Easy, baby. We'll be up and steady in no time."

I grab his arm and squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth. We lift off and my gaze lands on his arm and all the colorful red, blue, and green of the musical notes there. My eyes meet Kace's. "When did you get them?"

"The minute I turned eighteen."

"The minute no one could stop you."

"Exactly," he confirms.

The plane sways left and right. "I could assume they mean your music is a part of you, and you it, but you don't seem that simple of a man."

He arches a brow. "Is that right?"

"It is. So, what do they really mean to you?"

"My father was a real estate investor who owned part of an NBA team. He didn't want his son playing a piece of shit violin when he could be playing sports."

I twist around to face him, the flight forgotten. "An actual NBA team?"

a reckless note

“Yes. An actual NBA team.”

“My God. How much money do you have, Kace?”

“More than any one man should have, and that’s just how my father liked it. To him, money was power. And he wasn’t wrong. It is. But it’s power that should be wielded with a thoughtful hand, not a whip. He liked the whip. I prefer the thoughtful hand.” His lips thin and he moves on. “As for the tattoos, if I wasn’t going to play sports, he wanted me in a suit in the boardroom. He hated my music and he hated tattoos. The tattoos were a fuck you to him that I ended up liking.”

There is a lot of baggage in everything he just told me, the kind I’m certain this man doesn’t share, but he told me. He told me and I sense he doesn’t want to go deeper. No one understands the point of “enough for now” than me, so I focus on the lighter side of things. I dare to flirt, and I’m not someone who exactly masters that skill, but this is Kace. I’m different with Kace. “I like them, too. They’re sexy like you are when playing your violin.”

His hand covers mine, his eyes warm again, attentive. “I’m glad you think so.” And then he surprises me by giving me more, perhaps because I didn’t try to take it. “My father didn’t agree.”

“Well, if he thought you were sexy, that would be creepy.”

He laughs. “Yes. I suppose that is exactly right.”

“How did your father react?”

“He threatened to disinherit me, but I was his only heir. That wasn’t going to happen.”

“Even after you became such a powerhouse all on your own? Surely he came around.”

“Never.”

“What about your mother?”

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“She supported me, but I believe she was afraid my father would leave her if she traveled with me. She let me know how proud she was when she could. I didn’t like how she handled things, but in truth, she’s the reason I played at all. She put a violin in my hand and then convinced my father it would create discipline I’d use in business.”

“You said your father saw money as power. Did the money finally win him over?”

“Yeah. When he tried to pull me from tour and I threatened to use that money to petition for emancipation.”

“Oh my God. What did he do?”

“He backed off. Better a rock star son with money than a rock star son who disowns you. It would have embarrassed him far more than my violin and I knew that because my mother told me it would. I was the misfit who inherited his empire. I’m sure that bothers him even from the grave.”

“Do you now own part of an NBA team?”

“I kept it for a while, just to prove to my father that I, a man with a violin, was just as capable as him. Which was silly. He’s dead. I’m a football and violin guy. A year in, I sold it and pocketed the money.”

“And the rest of his business?”

“Real estate is a good investment. I still own that part of his business. I have a CEO who runs the show with my input.”

“I just—you’ve written lots of hit songs. And I know that because Sara told me and I gathered as much from Nix, too. Surely your father saw that.”

“I never told him. He never asked. He had no idea. He didn’t know when I won a Grammy. He didn’t know when my first song hit number one. All he saw was the violin. Which reminds me. Speaking of my violin.” He

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unbuckles himself and stands, reaching to an overhead bin and removing his violin case before motioning me to the couch and table across from us. “You’re supposed to tell me if this is real.”

The ride is calm, no bump in sight, and I find I’ve forgotten the flight completely. There is just this man and that violin, a piece of my history that was both beautiful and destructive. With my heart racing, I unbuckle and move across the aisle. I sit down next to Kace and watch as he opens the case, displaying the shiny wood of a stunning instrument. My mind flashes back to the three Stradivarius violins my father owned and kept sealed in a vaulted room underground. I’ve often wondered if they could still be there. I wonder now if my brother went after them.

I studied those instruments in detail with my father and brother. I was young, but I listened to every word our father said about their history, their creation, even before his death when I studied his writings quite obsessively.

“This,” Kace says, motioning to the violin, “is my favorite instrument I’ve ever played by far, and I’ve played hundreds of violins.” He glances over at me. “You want to hold it?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I do not want to risk hurting it.”

“You aren’t going to hurt it.”

“I just want to look,” I say. “Can I see the flashlight on your phone? Mine is in my purse.”

He pulls it from his pocket, turns on the light, and hands it to me. I lean in and start scanning the instrument inside and out, the best I can in the case. When I exhaust that view, I eye Kace. “Can you pick it up?”

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He grabs a towel and lifts it, settling it on his knee. I go down on my knees in front of him. My hand goes to his leg without hesitation, our eyes colliding momentarily, our growing comfort and intimacy between us. I lean in, scanning the parts of the violin I couldn't see before, from every possible angle. I find all the proper markings, but so far there is no visible watermark, but it's hard to get to certain parts of the instrument.

"Move it a little this way," I say, motioning to the right before leaning in and shining the light once more. And there it is. *The watermark*.

"It's real," I say, leaning back on my haunches. "It's real." I stand up and then sit next to him, stunned, truly stunned. "I haven't seen a real Stradivarius since—" I stop myself just in time, so close to saying too much.

Kace tilts his head and studies me. "Since when?"

"A very long time," I say quickly. "It's a majestic instrument."

He's still watching me with such intent I swear it feels like he's going to crawl under my skin and sink straight into my soul. I'm panicking, not sure what I will say if he pushes me for more, so I just give him more on my terms. "Antonio Stradivari placed a unique watermark in each instrument, his signature. No mark is in the same place. All are quite hard to find. The instrument up for auction at Riptide didn't have it. This one does."

"How do you know about the watermark when clearly many experts don't?"

"My client, the person who taught me what to look for, was intimate with the family before they disappeared." And then because I'm walking a line between truth and lies, I quickly add, "I can't believe I'm looking at the real deal."

a reckless note

He watches me for a moment, weighing something in my words, his expression unreadable, but he doesn't push. He grabs his bow and scoots back a bit to give himself space. "I believe I can tell a real Stradivarius by the sound." He plays a few notes, beautiful notes, soft and then rugged. "The richness it delivers is like that of no other instrument."

"And now I am one of the few people who have heard a Stradivarius played this close and thirty-thousand feet up in the air. How do you feel about the other two you have at home? Are they real? Do they sound the same?"

"No two Stradivarius violins sound exactly the same, but I'm not a fan of one of the two which now has me curious about your future assessment. In fact, I never use it but then, I'm partial. This one," he says, running a hand over the wood of his instrument, "the tone is magnificent, and that's why I stick with it."

"Do you use a practice instrument to limit risk of damage to the Stradivarius?"

"Only when I was on tour and forced to practice on a plane, which meant I could be jolted about and damage the violin. I adjust how I play based on what the instrument delivers and my primary instrument delivers at a high level. I deliver at a higher level when I'm playing it. I want to practice at the same level I perform." He returns the violin to the case and seals it inside.

"How many hours a week do you practice?" I ask.

He leans his shoulder on the seat, facing me, and me him. "Most people think I no longer need to practice that often."

"Because you're Kace August the Great? No longer human? No one stays the best, and you are the best, if they don't improve their craft."

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“Very few people understand that or the pressure that puts on me.”

On some level I know he knows I am not what I seem. I know he knows I come from his world. And I know he wants answers, ones he hopes I’ll offer. I don’t offer any. Not now. “How many hours do you practice a week?” I ask again.

“Every day, even when I travel.”

“Being on the road really does sound challenging,” I say, and before I can stop myself I add, “Unsettling, though I bet exciting. Adventurous. *Lonely*.”

“It is all of those things and more. Sometimes all at once. Sometimes not. But it served a purpose.”

It’s an answer I would give, one that says much and nothing at all. One that reaffirms my belief that he is a man of mystique, who appears to share himself with the world and somehow share very little at all. It’s a gift that also requires practice and motivation. It’s a talent of necessity. Still, it’s clear he’s slowly opening up to me. I haven’t opened to him. Not much.

For that reason, I don’t press him to go deeper, to explain that purpose. I don’t ask him because I now know that I understand him beyond the content of words. Instead, my hand dares to go to his forearm, my finger tracing one of the musical note tattoos on his arm. It’s my silent way of telling him that I know he was running from the family and the pain represented.

He covers my hand with his and our eyes connect, the lighthearted mood shifting, the air thickening with our shared attraction. “What did the song I was playing at the gallery mean to you?”

My lashes lower, his music and that song playing in my mind. Kace cups my face, drawing my gaze to his. “You don’t have to tell me.”

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“It reminded me of a romantic moment between my father and mother. A good memory but still painful. I miss them often.” I dare to run my fingers over his jaw. “I really loved getting ready this morning to the sound of you playing. *Really* loved it.”

“Maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to tell me why you love the violin so much and how you really know what you know about the Stradivarius.” He kisses my fingers. “Not today, I know, but one day. We need to try to rest a bit.” He stands, taking the case with him and placing it back in the overhead bin. He offers me his hand and the moment my palm is in his palm and I’m standing, the plane begins to jump and jolt. Kace grabs the ceiling and wraps his free arm around me, his eyes meeting mine as he says, “Hold on, baby, and I will, too.”

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chapter thirty-five

Kace and I lay with our seats back, facing each other, no arm between us, our legs entangled—talking. We just talk. At my prodding, he tells me stories about the different countries he’s visited—about the food, the people, his shows. We talk for what feels like hours, until my eyes grow heavy and he pulls me under his arm, onto his chest. I fall asleep just like that, in his arms, with his heart thundering under my ear. I wake to him stroking my hair, murmuring in my ear, just before the wheels hit the ground.

Once we’re off the plane and inside the private airport, we head toward the front door, me rolling one bag and Kace handling the rest. “We have to find a drive-thru that’s open,” he says. “I need food. Now.”

“Me, too,” I say. “It’s late, though. Do we have a car service waiting or how does this work?”

“I rented a car,” he says, “that should be here waiting on us outside.” We exit the building into the parking lot and thank God Kace suggested we stick our coats in the bags because it’s warm, like sixties, versus the thirties back home.

“Here we are,” Kace says, motioning to the fancy black sports car sitting near the door. “That will be us. The keys are under the seat.”

I blink. “Is that a Porsche? Can you even rent a Porsche?”

“Money buys just about anything, baby. And as for the Porsche, it’s the best they had on short notice.” He opens the door, grabs the keys, and pops the trunk.

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“I’m not a Porsche guy. Chris is. The man loves these damn cars.”

We load up the trunk and then us inside the car. He revs the engine. “It’s a beast, that’s for sure.”

“Why don’t you like it?” I ask, running my hand over the leather. “It’s a beautiful car.”

“It’s all muscle. I guess it’s that damn Stradivarius spoiling me, but I like a little more finesse.” He shifts into reverse and it’s not long before we’re on the highway and driving with confidence.

“You know where you’re going?” I ask.

“I’ve been here a few times. We’re headed downtown. The event is actually inside the Driskell hotel, which is why we’re staying at the Fairmont hotel for privacy reasons.” He motions to a road sign that lists restaurants coming up. “We have McDonald’s, Taco Bell, and Whataburger. Whataburger is big here in Texas. The locals love it.”

“Whataburger it is, then,” I say, and it’s not long before we’re sitting in a parking lot, eating burgers and fries.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“It’s good,” I say.

He arches a brow. “Not great?”

“It’s good,” I repeat.

“You Whataburger traitor, you,” he teases. “At least I’m not alone. I feel the same.”

“If you don’t love it, why’d we eat here?”

“Because you can’t get it anywhere but here. Everyone will ask you if you tried it. I wanted you to be able to say yes.” He tosses his wrapper into the bag. “I’m ready for the room.” He shifts us into drive and I’m left feeling the impact of what might have been a simple act, but it’s a show of his character. He can have

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anything he wants in the world, but he was worried about my experience, not his own.

I'm falling for this man, and not gently. It's like a roll down a steep mountainside and I just can't stop.



Twenty minutes later, we've left the car with a valet at the front of the Fairmont, and we're walking through the gorgeous lobby with indoor trees sparkling with blue lights to match the furniture.

We are, to no surprise considering all I now know of Kace, staying in the Presidential Suite, and the staff stumbles over themselves to offer us service. With our bags being delivered by a bellman, Kace drapes his arm around me and we walk toward the elevator, not another guest in view. "It's a ghost town," I say. "What time is it?"

"Almost midnight," he says, glancing at his watch. "We lingered with Nix and Becca way too long." He punches the call button on the elevator.

"I liked Becca," I say. "Nix wasn't that bad."

"Bear's the one who declared him a bastard," he replies, pointing the doors of a car to our right that are opening. "And now you know why."

"You agreed with Bear," I remind him as we step into the car and he uses his card to punch in the top level, "*and* went to the Hamptons before this trip to control Nix."

"I did," he agrees, turning to face me. "But not because he's a bastard. Because Nix is a man you control or he controls you."

"And no one controls you?"

"Not anymore," he says, pulling me close, and while he says no more, I'm certain that reply is a small

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reference to his father. A small indication as well that that pain lingers with him. "It's time," he adds, caressing hair behind my ear. "To take you to bed with me."

It's then that I realize that I haven't actually shared a bed with Kace. A rug, the floor, and an airplane seat, yes, but not a bed. It's only now that I realize I met him just three weeks ago and now I'm here, halfway across the country with him. "I really can't believe I'm in Texas with you right now."

"Believe it, baby. It doesn't stop here." His voice is a sultry mix of warmth and wickedness, the words packed with meaning, and his intent toward the future. A future neither of us intended. We were supposed to be one night, at least in my mind. I was pretty sure his "I'm not a forever guy" comment meant in his as well.

The elevator halts and he catches my hand, guiding me toward the door. I'm becoming accustomed to him touching me, of being with him, and far too fast and too easily. Already, I'm terrifyingly aware that this man could hurt me. Already, I'm exposed in ways beyond the physical and no one has ever found that part of me.

Just Kace.

Only Kace.

We exit to the hallway and our bags are exiting with a bellman from the next car over. It's not long before we're inside a beautiful suite decorated in the same blues as downstairs. I explore the living room, dining room, and then the bedroom while Kace talks to the bellman. I walk past the master bed to a wide window and scan the view of what I've gathered to be Town Lake, the lights of a bridge burning through the darkness. I set my purse on the chair beside me and check my phone to find no calls, no messages.

"Dam it, Gio," I murmur.

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The door shuts in the distance and I shove my phone back into my purse, turning to find Kace entering the bedroom. We walk toward each other, meeting at the end of the king-size bed. He cups my head and stares down at me. "Believe it, baby," he murmurs again, repeating his words in the elevator, and then his mouth is on mine, his tongue stroking a long, deep caress that has me moaning with the sweet burn of my body.

The kiss is long and drugging. When our lips part, he turns us, his back to the bed, with me facing him. His hands rest possessively on my hips. "Undress for me."

I blink and his hands have fallen away. He sits down on the bed as if he intends to literally watch me, tugging off his boots and setting them aside, before he repeats his words. "Undress for me, Aria."

My heart thunders in my ears. I have never undressed so boldly for a man. I've had sex. I've dated. It all went badly. Maybe I wanted it to go badly. I was always suspicious of everyone around me. No one made me want them more than I feared everything else. Kace is not those men. I meet his stare, and in his eyes, I find a challenge. I see him asking me to trust him, and we both know I have not given him that trust, not fully. I want to, God how I want to, but while I might not be running from him, it is too soon to speak to him of a past that until lately, I *have* been running from. I was told to run.

I need Kace to know that I'm getting there, I'm working on trust.

Still, there is no denying the power play in the moment. He is dressed. He is waiting on me to willingly be naked and vulnerable. And there is no denying that there's something wickedly erotic about undressing for

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him. I am forever vulnerable with this man but he has yet to give me a single reason to regret those moments.

I do not believe he'll make me regret this one either.

Catching the hem of my sweater, I peel it over my head and then toss it to the bed near him. In the process, my hair is all over my face because that's how well I do sexy. With some struggle, I shove it aside to find Kace's lips curved, but he's not laughing at me. There's endearment in his eyes and warmth, the same sultry warmth that I'm coming to welcome from him. My teeth scrape my bottom lip and his gaze drops, lingering, my sex clenching with the idea that he might be thinking about where my mouth might be next. That line of tattoos down his belly gets my vote.

I decide the best way to make that happen, is to undress without delay.

I quickly remove my boots and toss them, immediately reaching for my pants. His eyes stay on my face, watching me, his expression unreadable, but that darker, edgier side of him is present, that part of him I do not know and should probably fear, but instead crave understanding.

I step out of my pants, leaving myself in only the expensive black lace bra and panties I found among the shopping bags. His gaze lowers and sweeps my body, then lifts. "All of it, baby."

"You paid a lot of money for this little bit of lace."

"That I appreciate so much that I want it off," he says, his voice affected, low, almost gruff. "Everything off, Aria."

I don't know what affects me more: when he calls me baby or when he uses my name. I think my name. It tells me how present he is, how with me.

I inhale and unhook the front clasp of my bra, letting it fall away from my shoulders. Immediately

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after, I'm stepping out of the panties. Kace's gaze slides over my body, my nipples pucker with his heated stare. I am wet. I am nervous. I am aroused.

"Come here," he orders, and while I am not a person to take orders, there is something about being told what to do by this man in this situation that is ever so enticing.

I close the two steps between us and he doesn't make me wait for my reward. His hands are back on my hips and his eyes meet mine. "You really are beautiful, Aria." His lips touch my belly, that simple touch darting sensations through my entire body, forcing my lashes to lower. My throat is dry, my nipples tingling. Every part of me is alive because of this man. I am not sure I have ever been *this alive*.

Suddenly, I'm on the bed, on my back, and he's tugging his shirt over his head. My fantasy of kissing and licking his tattoos is in the forefront of my mind, but it's hard to think when he is touching me and kissing me all over. I have a moment, just a moment when my mouth is on his arm, on one of those musical notes etched into his skin, but it doesn't last. We are all over each other and soon his pants are gone, and we both roll the condom over him.

We are side by side, his hand on my backside when he presses inside me. I gasp with the feel of him so hot and hard, with the sensation of him driving deep. And then his fingers are in my hair and he tugs my head back, his lips lingering over my lips. "I swear, woman," he murmurs, "you're a drug and I'm addicted." Already, his mouth is on my mouth, a slow burn between us that is wild and wicked one moment and sultry the next.

And when it's over, when we are both trembling and crashing into each other and the soft pull of the mattress, the late hour, and the night, it's not over at

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all. Kace and I snuggle under the blanket together and we don't even need words. We come back together, our bodies close, my head on his shoulder.

And I sleep.

I sleep better than I have since my last peaceful day in Italy, the last night my family was whole.

chapter thirty-six

I wake in Kace's arms, and it's not long until we're in the shower together, and I finally do what I have wanted to do since I discovered those tattoos on his belly. I dare to press him into the corner. I dare to take control.

The heat in his eyes says he doesn't mind, not one bit. "What are you doing, baby?"

"What I've wanted to do since I discovered all your tattoos." I go down on my knees and my gaze lifts to his as I kiss one tattoo and then lick it. He laughs a low, rumbling laugh, that hums with arousal.

"That's what you've wanted to do?"

"Oh yes," I say. "Very much so."

Hard muscle flexes beneath my palm as my mouth travels each and every one of those musical notes etched in his skin, all the way down his belly. By the time I'm there, he's hot and hard, his cock jutting forward, now at my shoulder, and I can't neglect any part of him. I wrap my hand around him and lick the head.

His lashes lower, the lines of his face as taut as every muscle in his body and soon I am licking a whole lot of everything, everywhere. He speaks of money as power, but I believe right now, on the floor of this shower, there is power in making this man moan, to have him lost and completely out of his own head.

When I've taken him over the edge, he pulls me to my feet and I'm the one in the corner, his hand stroking over my wet hair, tilting my face to his. "I wear a

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condom, baby. I have always worn a condom but for you, with you—I want you to go on the pill.”

For me.

With me.

I don't hesitate. I don't overthink. At least in that steamy, wet moment, I decide right then that maybe this is all sex, and sex would be better without limitations. Maybe he doesn't even care about my secrets because this is lust. And if it's all lust and sex, why shouldn't I enjoy the ride? “I'll call my doctor Monday,” I say, and my reward is him on his knees, and my leg over his shoulder. No, my reward is the quake of my body that he owns with such fierceness that I can barely say my own name when it's over. I certainly cannot stand without his help. And he loves it. He holds me up and then pulls me under the water, where he soaps me up and promises me coffee followed by queso. It's a pretty perfect way to start a day.

Much later, with me in a robe and him in just a pair of sweats, we are sharing coffee on a loveseat on the patio off the living room. Our plans for the day include a trip to a Mexican restaurant he swears I'll love, and exploring downtown.

“Have you ever been in love, Aria?” he surprises me by asking.

I add cream to my newly poured coffee. “Not even close.”

“Not even close?” he presses.

I shrug and sink back into the cushion, facing him. “I dated here and there,” I say. “I believe I had my family business on my mind perhaps a little too much.” I leave out the part where my family business is far more complicated than my store.

“And your brother? Is he married?”

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“He has a revolving door of women, but I’d be surprised if that man ever got serious with anyone.” I set my cup down. “What about you?”

“I’ve never looked for love. It’s never called to me, at all. I’ve had agreements with a few women to basically be fuck buddies, one of which went on too long for all the wrong reasons, and ended really fucking badly.”

Any curiosity I have about that woman is ended with realization and the slap his words delivers. We’re fuck buddies. Despite *just* having that thought in the shower, or rather using that thought to empower myself in the shower, I am now bleeding a little inside. I’ve gotten attached and did so ridiculously fast. I’m like a kid in her first real man-candy store. I got high on the sugar and he’s the candy.

He takes my cup and sets it down, scooting closer, cupping my face and tilting my gaze to his. “No. *We* are not fuck buddies. That’s not what I want from you.”

I’m confused and I don’t like it. I’m tired of being confused with this man. “Then what *do* you want?”

“All I know, baby, is I’m addicted. And if I’m honest, yes, I want to fuck you all the damn time, which is why I asked you to go on the pill. But I also want more. I want to kiss you. I want to have coffee with you. I want to talk to you. I want you with me and I have never wanted so damn much with another woman.” He stands and takes me with him. “And if you want those things too, then I want you to go get dressed so we can go get our Mexican food.”

My stomach chooses that moment to growl and loudly. We both laugh and it’s pretty clear. I’m going to lunch with him. I’m going a lot of places with Kace that all lead to one place: to that honesty thing. I have to tell

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him who I am. Just not this weekend. When we get home.



The Mexican food is wonderful and we sit and drink margaritas and munch for a good two hours. Afterward, we walk the downtown Austin area, enjoying the city in the mild October Texas weather. Before we know it, it's nearly four, and time to head to the hotel to get ready for the evening. We're just getting back in the car and he's opened my door, when I realize I have a problem. "Kace, I don't have anything to wear tonight," I say urgently. "I have to stop by somewhere, anywhere. There were a couple of dresses in the things you bought me, but I don't even know if they fit and none are formal."

"There's a personal shopper meeting you at the room in half an hour."

"That sounds expensive."

"Baby, I knew you needed a dress. This weekend is on me."

"Okay we need to talk about this at some point. If we are going to keep doing this, whatever this is—"

"Then you're going to have to get used to my money and we *are* going to keep doing this."

"We are not about your money."

"My money is a part of me and that means us, Aria. It's not going away and neither are we. And tonight is about using my skills to make more money while doing something positive to help other people. I'm in a blessed place where I can spend money and still generously donate to charities that speak to me. Chris is in the same place, which makes these events all the more accessible to us as a team."

a reckless note

I remember Sara talking about the suicide prevention charity being close to Chris and Kace's hearts. I want to ask him about the suicide prevention subject, about what it means to him, but it feels like a heavy topic, one that shouldn't be discussed with a tight schedule.

I kiss his cheek and climb into the Porsche.



Once we're back in our room, the personal shopper, a beautiful brunette named Marcie I'd age in her thirties, is quick to join us. I don't miss how goo-goo-eyed she is over Kace either, but if Kace notices, it doesn't show. His attention is all mine. "Pick what you love," he says. "Pick more than one dress. Take them all if you want them. I'll be on the balcony making a few calls." He kisses me and saunters away in all his male perfection.

Marcie sighs. "The way he looks at you, like you're his world. Lucky you."

She isn't really appropriate at all, but I have a feeling that happens a lot where Kace is concerned. I just focus my energy on the twenty or so dresses she's brought me to try on and look *appropriate* for tonight. I immediately gravitate toward a long wine-colored silk gown with a right slit, V-neck and a cute crisscross and tie at the back. I try it on, and for once, something I adore on the hanger fits as well as I want it to fit. I'm sold and after picking out a cute glittery purse and shoes, I send goo-goo-eyed Marcie on her way, pull on a robe, and head outside to share the news with Kace.

I'm just about to step around the corner and onto the balcony when I hear him say, "I know, but she is not

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just anyone. I'm not doing that. I'm keeping her with me. No. Hell no."

I'm almost certain he's talking about me and I back away, deciding that as much as I want to know the context of that call, I cannot eavesdrop. There's no way to ask him about the call without letting him know I did, even if it wasn't intentional. And he has to perform. My gut says to leave this alone, at least for now.

I hurry away to the bathroom, and for reasons I can't explain, that call I overheard made me need to hear from my brother. I check my messages and of course, there is nothing. I try his number and it goes to voicemail. Frustration rips through me. I have to go home and hire that PI, which means I need money. In other words, I either have to work with Alexander or get Ed the client he's trying to squash to meet his offer, but that all has to wait until Monday.

For now, I promised myself this weekend with Kace. I hurry to the shower, and step in, enjoying the warm water in some length. I'm out, wrapped in a robe, my hair fully dried, when Kace walks in. In a blink, I'm in his arms, and he's kissing me. "I'm glad you're here, Aria." His voice is gravelly, affected.

My heart swells with the impact of his words and actions. "Me, too," I whisper.

He eases back and gives me a once over. "Why are you wearing the hotel robe? You don't like the silk robe that was in the shopping bags?"

"It's three hundred dollars, Kace. That's insanity."

He catches the knot on the hotel robe. "Wear the robe and enjoy it. I sure will if you ever let me see it." He softens his voice. "Please, Aria."

"Please? I didn't know you knew that word."

"I prefer it when you say it, and would suggest ways to use it while naked, but yes. *Please* wear the robe."

a reckless note

My lips curve. “Since you said please. Okay. Tomorrow. I’m about to get dressed now.”

“You’re happy with your dress?”

“I love it.” I motion behind him to where it hangs. He twists around to look at it and then me. “It’s beautiful, baby. I can’t wait to see it on you.” He rotates and leans on the counter, taking me with him. “One thing I need to tell you about tonight. There’s an after-party which I normally skip, but it’s Marvin’s birthday and it might be the last one he has with this group. My team rented out a club in the warehouse party district here in downtown Austin.”

“That sounds fun.”

“Ah well—they can be, but they get a little wild.”

My hand slides over his thick stubble. “You look a little wild. You need a shave.”

He runs his hand over his jaw and glances in the mirror. “So I do.” He grabs his overnight kit and pulls out his razor.

“I’ll do it for you,” I offer, and his hand settles on my hip.

“Will you now?”

“If you trust me.”

“I do trust you, Aria.” He catches my waist and lifts me to the sink. “Have you done this before?”

“Oh well. I plead the fifth.”

He laughs a low, rough sexy laugh. “I’ve never let anyone shave me either, so you’ll be the first. The first in so many ways, Aria.”

“The first woman to be trusted with a sharp object. I feel pressure. Let’s hope I don’t cut you now.”

We both laugh and I can almost feel the bond growing between us. And the good news is that I do not, in fact, cut him. I don’t hurt him in any way. I just pray he does me the same favor.

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chapter thirty-seven

With his reluctant agreement, I shut Kace out of the bathroom while I finish dressing, wanting to show him the dress once I'm perfectly primped. When I've achieved that goal, I nervously open the bathroom door and step into the bedroom. Kace is sitting in a chair, looking like the hottest king of the world ever, with a whiskey glass in his hand. The glass immediately goes on the table and he stands, and God, the man really is gorgeous. Tonight, his longish dark hair is finger spiked, and his rock star image is on full display. He's in black jeans and a T-shirt paired with biker boots, all of which he's accented with a black leather jacket. I've officially forgotten pretty much everything including my name.

He closes the space between me and him, all male swagger and sex appeal, and when he stops in front of me, his hand presses possessively to my hip, branding me with heat. "You look stunning, baby."

My hand settles on his chest and I boldly say exactly what I think. "So do you. *Always.*"

His lips curve. "I'm glad you think so." He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. "We need to go. It's getting late. Tonight, we have the local Texas division of Walker Security on board. They're waiting on us out front."

A few minutes later, we step outside to find a huge man in all black with a scar down his face waiting on us beside an Escalade.

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“What the hell, Savage?” Kace greets, shaking his hand. “I thought we got the Texas team while here.” Kace glances at me. “This is Rick Savage, who normally works with the New York division of Walker.”

“Hello,” Savage says, fixing me in a friendly but somehow appropriately savage stare. “Don’t let the scar scare you. I killed the guy. He’s not around to bother you.”

I gape and surprise myself by laughing before he turns his attention to Kace. “My lady and I are from Texas. She wanted real Mexican food, so here we are. Besides, who better to pump you up for a show? I know what you need. You know I do. I have the radio tuned to some old-school jams, just the way you like it.”

We load into the vehicle and say hello to the driver, a man Savage calls Dirty Dan, before Savage cranks up the music. The first song “So Into You,” that blasts through the speakers is one that I remember from the nineties by a now MIA singer called Fabolous. I loved that song, and as it plays, Kace whispers the words into my ear. I’m smiling and laughing as we draw close to the hotel and the song shifts. This one though, also a nineties tune, hits home, and carves out a piece of me. It’s an Dr. Dre song featuring Eminem and Skylar Grey called “I Need a Doctor.” The words repeat over and over:

*I’m about to lose my mind
You’ve been gone for so long
I’m running out of time*

The vehicle stops in front of the hotel and I quickly grab my phone and send a text to Gio: *Call me. Stop being an asshole. You’re scaring me.* I glance up and Kace is staring at me.

“You okay?”

a reckless note

“Yes, of course,” I say quickly, hoping the music hides strain in my voice. “I’m excited to watch you perform.”

The Escalade is now in front of the hotel entrance and the doors open. Kace has my hand, holding onto me as we scoot across the seat toward his exit, but I manage to drop my phone. He reaches down and grabs it from the floorboard for me, but not without his gaze landing on the text.

He leans into me and slides the phone back into my purse, but in doing so he cups my face and kisses my neck, whispering, “We’ll talk when we get inside.”

I don’t know what that means, but I’m pretty sure it’s a distraction he can’t afford right now, when he’s about to perform. He steps out of the vehicle and then helps me out as well. Savage and Dirty Dan, a tall man with blond hair tied at his nape, are by our sides as we walk beneath an overhang leading to the hotel door, when I hear squeals, followed by “Oh my God, it’s him! It’s Kace August!”

Suddenly, a horde of people, women mostly, surround us, shoving things at Kace, asking for photos and autographs. Kace pulls me close and whispers, “I know this is bad timing. Just stay close.”

Savage and Dan are instantly in action, along with several other men that I assume work for them or the hotel. Kace signs a few photos, but it’s all too much, too overwhelming, all the people who scream for him, the women who tell him they love him. I just want out of the circle we’re in and finally our path is clear. Savage leads us into the building. Once there, Savage and the men escort us past the lobby to a roped-off area that leads to red carpeted stairs. We hurry up them and once we’re on the next level, Kace directs Savage and the other guards to wait. He then pulls me down a

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deserted hallway and around a corner, where he plants me against a wall, him in front of me, one hand on my waist, the other on the wall by my head. “I’m going to help you find your brother.”

I blanch surprised that is still where his head is right now. “You need to be thinking about the event, Kace.”

“I’m thinking of you and your brother. I’m going to tell Walker to find Gio, at my expense.”

I swallow hard against the rise of emotion in my chest. “You can’t pay my way in the world.”

He glances skyward and then his eyes meet mine, turbulence in their depths. “I had a sister, Aria. I wanted to tell you earlier, but it felt too heavy. It felt like the wrong time.”

“You—you had a sister? You said you were the only one who could inherit your father’s money so his threats didn’t matter.”

“He gave Michelle less respect than he did me. She struggled with my father’s demands, with him running her life. She came on tour with me for a year and left me to go home, with a goal: being her own self. She wanted to be a tattoo artist. Dad blamed me and called her a loser. She killed herself, Aria. She was only twenty-one.”

“Oh my God. Kace, I’m—”

“Don’t say you’re sorry. You know that doesn’t help. What helps is me giving to a charity that does. That’s why I do this. That’s why suicide prevention is a mission for me. And that’s why I know you have to fight for your sibling.” He molds me close. “I’m going to help you. I *want* to help you.”

Fighting emotion, feeling his passion, his pain, my fingers curl on his jaw. “Thank you. I’m worried. I’m really worried, Kace.”

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“I know you are, baby. We’ll find him. I’ll have Savage meet us in the morning before we leave.” He kisses my hand. “And as for the mob out front. It usually only happens when I’m touring with announced concerts. I’m not wrapped up in my hype. Don’t you be wrapped up in my hype. I’m just a man. A man who’s damn glad you’re here. Let’s go make some money for charity.” His arm wraps around me and together, we walk into a ballroom, and I have a new understanding of Kace. I am fighting for my brother, but he lives every day fighting a battle that started with his father and never seems to end for him.

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chapter thirty-eight

We meet many of the charity handlers, as well as Chris and Sara, at the entry to the ballroom hosting the pre-event. Chris and Kace, I decide, really are a perfect pairing, as Chris, too, is a rebel in denim. He's in jeans, boots, and a blue T-shirt with *Live, Don't Die* etched on the front, his brightly colored dragon tattoo on full display. Sara is lovely as always, her long brown hair pinned up tonight, her gown emerald green silk.

Sara and Chris greet me with genuine welcome and as I listen in on talks with the handlers, I quickly learn that the crowd is much larger than the one at the Riptide VIP event, with at least a hundred extra guests. There will be an auction it seems, as well, but each person in attendance has paid a gasp-worthy sum to attend tonight's performance. All of the proceeds go to the charity. Chris and Kace are taking nothing.

About twenty minutes into the four of us mingling, Kace and Chris take their places at tables near the front of the room to sign autographs, and do so with me and Sara happily in tow. The eagerness to meet them, to chat with them one-on-one for just a moment, creates quite the lines.

When finally showtime arrives, Kace is not shy about kissing me, as Chris does Sara, before the two of them disappear behind the stage. Sara and I are quick to claim our VIP seats side-by-side, up front again. Kace's entire crew is here, including, unfortunately, Kiki and her ten miles of cleavage in a white silk gown. She waves at me and I give her a nod. Jon Snow took a

knee. I will not take a knee for this woman and the wave feels like a knee. Sara nudges me and gives a low laugh. “You really don’t like her.”

“Would you if she were working for Chris?”

“Probably not, but Kace has eyes for no one but you. That’s obvious. And if I might, speaking from experience, with men like Chris and Kace, you will never erase those who admire and define them. It’s part of who they are. It’s how they handle that admiration that defines their character. From what I’ve seen, Kace gets a thumbs-up.”

“He does,” I agree readily, thinking about pretty much everything he’s ever done for me. Thinking about his offer to help find Gio. “And I know he has fans,” I add. “Kiki just rubs me wrong.”

“Well, just remember, she can’t do anything he doesn’t allow her to do. It’s about Kace, not her.”

It’s sound advice, given just as the lights go down and the show starts, and all thoughts of Kiki are gone. To the crowd’s delight, Kace plays songs from horror movies, and Chris paints the characters. Everyone is in the spooky October season, as the crowd starts singing “One, Two, Freddy’s Coming For You,” as Chris paints Freddy Krueger.

There is much more that follows, and we are treated to Kace’s music and Chris’s talent in abundance. Kace plays half the music he performs for the event on his Stradivarius and half on a donated instrument for the auction. His skills are beautiful with either violin, but the Stradivarius is distinct. My ancestor knew what he was doing. Now, the rest of the world still wants to know how and they can’t figure it out. Some say there are people who would kill for that formula—and have, considering my father’s demise—people who believe

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the family has it hidden. Gio and I would be the only living family.

When the show ends, there are six paintings to auction off and of course, the donated instrument. The final haul for the charity is massive and Kace and Chris are obviously pleased.

When all is said and done, after the chaos at the front of the hotel when we arrived, we are directed to the back door to depart. That is where we say our surprise goodbyes to Chris and Sara. “We’re headed home to San Francisco,” Chris says. “We’ve been gone for weeks.”

“We need to be home for a bit,” Sara adds, hugging me before she looks between me and Kace. “Hope to see you both in two weeks for the final shows.” She smiles at me as they exit the hotel.

Kace takes her lead, catching my shoulders and pulls me close. “I want you to go with me.”

I’m still stunned by the magnitude of this man’s devotion to me and as much as I want to go with him, I feel the pull of home. “I’m just worried about Gio, Kace,” I admit, and it feels good to actually say that to him rather than think it, hide it. I have to tell him everything there is to tell and soon, before we talk to Walker. Is it even safe to trust them? I’ll trust Kace with my secrets. I’m not sure about a bunch of strangers, but can Walker help if I tell them half the story?

“Walker is damn good,” Kace says. “Two weeks from now, if all goes well, you’ll have Gio back.”

“There they are!”

At the sound of Kiki’s voice, Kace rotates us, his arm around my shoulders, as her, Marvin, and really the whole crew, rush toward us. I count ten people. Everyone is singing “Happy Birthday” as they exit the

building, but I don't miss the moment when Kiki looks me up and down.

Kace's arm is, as always it seems lately, protectively wrapped around me as we follow the crowd out the doors to find Savage and Dan waiting right beside the Escalade. "My instrument?" Kace asks.

"Under guard and fucking key," Savage assures him.

Dan translates. "On its way to the hotel vault by way of our team. We'll text you when it's locked down."

"Exactly what I said," Savage snaps and opens the passenger door. Kace and I laugh and load up in our vehicle. Once we're on the road, I have my first chance to talk about the show with Kace. "I love the entire horror show thing you and Chris did," I say, once we're on the road. "That was so unexpected and original."

"Chris and Sara were close to a young cancer patient who loved horror movies, which apparently, Chris does as well. He really bonded with the kid. A deep bond and the boy didn't make it. It affects Chris and Sara. I can tell. We're going to do the same format for the Christmas show in the young man's honor, and for the benefit of the children's hospital."

"Horror at Christmas?" I laugh.

"That will shock the crowd." He squeezes my leg and lowers his voice, changing the subject. "This party will be nuts. It's not my thing. You need to know that. Walker is controlling the doors. We're only attending because it's Marvin's birthday and I'm not going to travel with him anymore."

His concern touches me and I cover his hand with mine. "I know. You told me. It's all good."

"We don't have to stay long and—"

I kiss him, which I intend to make a quick peck, but he cups my head and deepens the kiss, drugging me,

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owning me oh so easily. “We are definitely not staying long,” he says, stroking my cheek. “I want you all to myself.”

I’m melting in the back of an Escalade that has now halted at our destination. Kace scans the window and I do the same, only to discover that we are now in front of a giant warehouse and already music vibrates through the walls, and people are lined up to enter.

At Savage’s urging, Dan pulls to a side entrance and halts again. This time we exit and enter the building next to a set of stairs. We walk up the wooden steps into a vaulted area where Kace’s entire team is hanging out, along with a ton of new faces. From there, we’re swept into the party atmosphere, sitting at a long wooden table.

His entire crew is funny and wonderful, and soon we are all drinking margaritas, singing along to a wild mix of country, rock, pop, and alternative music. There are women, lots of scantily clad women, but Kace is always right here with me. He makes sure I know, and everyone else knows, we’re together. There is cake for Marvin, and more scantily clad women dancing for him. Kace leans in and whispers, “Not my thing, baby. You are. Remember that.”

I’m feeling the buzz of tequila and my hand goes to his jaw, my mouth to his mouth. He kisses the hell out of me and strokes my hair. “Fifteen more minutes,” he says. “Then we leave.”

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I say, “or I might not make the ride home.”

“I’ll go with you.” He wiggles an eyebrow to let me know he has naughty intentions.

About that time, the girls hired to entertain Marvin hop on top of our table, dancing to the song “Bitter” by

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Fletcher. Kiki is with them and she stops in front of us, squatting down eye level to Kace, as she sings:

*I know you think about me when you kiss her
I left a taste in your mouth
Can she taste me now*

The very words imply that they've slept together and adrenaline surges through me. I'm on my feet in an instant, feeling sick, embarrassed, angry, hurt. Kace tries to stand but the chair hitches. It tumbles over and two half naked girls step between me and him. How appropriate. I'm gone before he can catch me and I don't go to the bathroom upstairs. I head down the wooden steps to the main dance floor and a mass of hundreds dancing and partying. I weave through the crowd, music pumping through me, trying to find the bathroom and when I'm finally there, there's a line from hell.

I twist around and head back into the crowd, but I just can't go back upstairs. I can't do it. I lean against a wall beside the DJ stand. I shut my eyes, fighting tears that I blame on the tequila. Kace doesn't get my tears. A tingling awareness has my lashes lifting as Kace steps in front of me. He folds me close, his hand on my face, cheek against my cheek. "Whatever you think that was, it was not. I am crazy about *you*, Aria."

I want to believe him, I do, but I'm terrified of being wrong. I press on his chest, feeling as if I'm suffocating in all his perfection that might not be perfect at all. He isn't having it. He catches my hand and starts walking, taking me with him. We maneuver through the crowd and don't stop until we're not only at the exit, we're outside the building, beside the Escalade. Kace waves Dan off and I don't know where he goes, but Kace turns me and presses me against the building, his powerful legs shackling mine. "I do *not* want her. I have not ever

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touched her, kissed her, or considered any of the above. I want *you*. Just you. And this isn't where I planned to do this, but baby, I'm telling you now. *I want just you.*"

"Then what was that, Kace?"

"I don't know what the hell that was, but I won't have her at the future shows. I didn't expect that. I didn't invite that."

"As you say about Alexander wanting me: she wants to fuck you."

"I've never heard you say that word."

"Tequila and her is a bad combination. It felt like there was more to that than her wanting you. The words she sang."

"Maybe she wants me."

"Maybe, Kace?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter. She doesn't matter. *You* matter."

"I'm still really upset right now, Kace. She embarrassed me. And I felt like—I felt bad and—"

He kisses me, drugs me with his tongue and taste, and all I can do is what I always do: *melt for him*. It's terrifying. It's wonderful. It's insanity, but it always feels so good. "I want you," he says, when our lips part. "Just you. I don't want you with fucking Alexander or anyone else. We are together now. Say it."

"You want—"

"Us. Exclusive. You and me, baby. I want you with me in California. I want you with me in Paris for Christmas. I want you with me. Say it. We're together."

All the reasons I've ever had to say no to this man become yes in that moment. "We're together."

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chapter thirty-nine

Kace and I don't stay at the party.

Dan and Savage drive us back to the hotel and the minute we're in the room, we're all over each other. We end up in the bed, naked, a new intimacy between us, tenderness, passion, lust, friendship—it's all there. We sleep late Sunday and plan to find a fun lunch spot. We're actually eating tacos on an outdoor patio when Kace brings up Gio. "Savage arranged to have his boss Blake Walker meet with us Tuesday in New York. It's the soonest he could involve Blake and Blake is a world class hacker. The kind of man that finds men wherever they may be hiding. Not that Gio is hiding. I know the delay sucks, but—"

"Thank you, Kace."

"I would have helped sooner, but I didn't realize until last night how worried you were. And Monday gives you time to pull together anything you think might help Walker find him."

"Yes. Yes, that works." What also works, I think, is the time this gives me to decide what to tell everyone, including Kace. I've lied to him about who I am, but I think he's the kind of reasonable man who will understand why. For now, today, I just want to enjoy Texas with him. And so I do. We do. It's a wonderful day and we don't board the private flight home until nearly seven, which will put us home at midnight.

We sleep most of the flight and when we land, we load up in his car and head to his apartment.

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Tomorrow, I'll go home. Not tonight. Tonight, I sleep in his bed, his real bed, with him.

Come Monday morning, I wake to Kace wrapped around me, and a call from Alexander that I decline, but it drives home a bit of reality. I have to attend to my customers. I have to face the real world of bills and demands. I have to decide if I will skip my mortgage to hire a private investigator. All that is huge, but for a little longer, I linger in the aftermath of the fabulous weekend.

Kace and I sit at the kitchen island, him in pajama bottoms and a delicious sexy stubble on his jaw, me in a robe, with my hair all over the place, eating egg whites he's made for us, and drinking coffee. Alas though, the inevitable seeps into the air. "I need to get home," I finally say.

"We'll go, pack some things, and come back here."

"I need to do some work and be ready for the meeting with Blake and Savage. And I have clients to attend to."

"Then we'll stay there."

"No," I say quickly. "My place is nothing like your place, Kace."

"I'd love to see your store and the apartments you and Gio designed."

I sip my coffee and think of Kace in my tiny bed. I reject the idea. I do not reject the reverse: me in his bed. "I can come back here, but I need a few hours to get some work done. I need to deal with my customer that Alexander is trying to freeze out for sure. I may need to go see him."

"And do what with Alexander?" There is a sharp quality to his voice I imagine I have when Kiki comes up.

"I'll handle him," I promise.

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“How?” he presses.

“I’ll decline Alexander’s offer. If I’m smart and lucky, I’ll get my client to match his retainer. Then I have to actually find him the wines he wants.”

“Chris’s family owns a winery and Sara does a bit of what you do, but for art. She finds art people really want to own. It seems like there could be some magic there. We could talk to them when we’re in San Fran for the shows.”

“I haven’t said I’m going,” I point out.

“I just gave you incentives to come. Did it work?”

I soften for this man oh so easily. “*You* are my incentive, Kace.”

His eyes light with my reply. I have pleased him in the way he often pleases me. “Kiki called to apologize,” he says, and when I obviously stiffen, he adds, “I told her she won’t be joining us for the remainder of the shows.”

My gut knots. “Now I feel bad. Sort of. Okay, I do. I don’t want her to lose her job.”

“It was already ending,” he says. “And I paid her and the entire crew a healthy sign-off bonus.” He glances at his watch and then back at me. “I need to go to the bank and handle a business transaction. Why don’t we shower, and I’ll be ready way before you, so I’ll go do that while you get ready and then we’ll grab a bite on our way to your place?”

“That sounds perfect.”

A half hour later, I’m in the three-hundred-dollar robe Kace bought me at his insistence and he’s fully dressed in faded jeans and a snug tan T-shirt that hugs his muscles in all kinds of perfect ways. He leans on the counter I’m now sitting in front of on a vanity chair. “You do remember I have two more Stradivarius violins for your inspection, right?”

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“I do,” I say. “I can’t wait to see them.”

“Last room at the end of the hallway. I’ll unlock the vault on my way out. Feel free to take a peek if I’m slow getting back.”

My eyes go wide and I twist to face him. “I won’t dare touch them. You know that. I need you to do that.”

“Touch me. I’ll touch them. That works. But you can give them a quick look and you know you want to. The paperwork for the auctions when I bought them both are in the display case. Be back soon.” He winks and disappears.

I laugh at his touch me comment and then quickly finish my makeup before dressing in faded jeans, a black T-shirt, and a pair of Guess sneakers. Finally, eagerly, I head down the hallway and walk into an incredible room, surrounded by windows and water with Kace’s awards lining one wall. It’s a simple room that is not simple, with several stools and music stands in the center of the space. There is also a desk in one cut out nook of an area.

The massive vault is next to the desk and I head in that direction. Nervous and excited I enter the open door to find the violins sitting on top of a display table, each on a stand. I walk toward them and immediately know neither were my father’s. This comes as a relief that I can’t quite name. I mean, Kace could have bought my father’s instruments at an auction if they hit the market. It just feels better that he didn’t.

I pull my phone from my pocket where I’ve placed it, and with my flashlight, inspect the violins. One is a darker wood than the other, and the woodwork is magnificent. I’m not surprised to find the watermark remarkably quickly. My second Stradivarius in days. I’m walking on that water outside the windows. I move on to the second instrument, but find no obvious mark,

a reckless note

and I'm not lifting the instrument. Not without Kace present.

I pull out the drawer to read the paperwork, and catch my hand on a juttred piece of wood. I yank back with a yelp as I slice my palm wide open. I'm gushing blood. Turning away from the violins that I do not want to damage, I hurry to the desk and sit down, looking for a tissue. I end up holding a piece of paper over the cut, to stop it from dripping on the desk. I open drawers to no avail, and then freeze when I find a folder that reads *Aria and Gio Stradivari*.

My real name. Gio's real name. There's also a napkin, which I grab and wrap around my hand. I'm shaking now. I'm shaking because there is no way Kace hasn't betrayed me. He knows who I am. He must have always known.

I grab the folder, and bleed on it and I don't even care. I probably need stitches but I don't care about that, either. I open the folder and suck in air as I find a full bio of my family and written speculation that the family is now in New York City. And we are. And he knew. I'm suddenly remembering how Kace seemed to assume I'd been to Italy in the past. He didn't assume. He knew I was born there. I shut the folder and stand up. He's after the formula to make the Stradivarius. He seduced me to get it and I let it happen. Anger and pain collide, and I'm all but running through the music room. I enter the bathroom and grab my purse because I just need something with me that feels like mine. And it has my cards and keys in it. I need to be home. I need to be there now.

I have to get out of here before he gets back. I run downstairs to the front door and I stare at the folder in my hand. I could take it, but why? I know all about my family. I was falling in love with Kace. I was falling

lisa renee jones

hard. I am such an idiot. I fling the damn folder across the room and papers fly everywhere. If he wants to know why I'm gone, now he knows. Because I know what a fraud I've been sleeping with. I open the door and exit, skipping the elevator, rushing to the stairs and starting the long walk down, making darn sure I don't run into Kace August. Not now, not ever again.

THE END...FOR NOW



Readers,

As always, I hope you'll forgive me for the cliffhanger! Hopefully, by now, you know I'm quite fond of them. The good news is I'm hard at work with books two and three in the Brilliance Trilogy, and you won't have long to wait for the remaining installments of Kace and Aria's story!



Book two, A WICKED SONG, is out on August 18th, and book three, A SINFUL ENCORE, is out on September 22nd! You can pre-order both books now!

<https://www.lisareneejones.com/brilliance-trilogy.html>



Did you enjoy Mark and Crystal & Chris and Sara? You can read both couples' story in my INSIDE OUT series which is in development for TV/movies! All of the books are available now, so no need to wait it out.

**HERE'S A SEXY MINI EXCERPT FROM
BOOK ONE OF THE INSIDE OUT SERIES, IF
I WERE YOU**

“Hands over your head,” he orders, pressing my palms to the glass above me, his body shadowing mine. “Stay like that.”

My pulse jumps wildly and adrenaline surges. I've been ordered around during sex, but in a clinical, bend over and give me what I want kind of way I tried to convince myself was hot. It wasn't. I hated every second, every instance, and I'd endured it. This is different though, erotic in a way I've never experienced, enticingly full of promise. My body is sensitized, pulsing with arousal. I am hot where Chris is touching me and cold where he isn't.

When he seems satisfied I'll comply with his orders, Chris slowly caresses a path down my arms, and then up and down my sides, brushing the curves of my breasts. He's in no hurry, but I am. I am literally quivering by the time his hands cover my breasts, welcoming the way he squeezes them roughly, before tugging on my nipples. I gasp with the pinching sensation he repeats over and over, creating waves of pleasure verging on pain, and the music is fading away, and so is the past. *There is pleasure in pain.* The words come back to me, and this time they resonate.

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His hands are suddenly gone, and I pant in desperation, trying to pull them back.

Chris captures my hands and forces them back to the glass above me, his breath warm by my ear, his hard body framing mine. “Move them again and I’ll stop what I’m doing, no matter how good it might feel.”

I quiver inside at the erotic command, surprised again by how enticed I am by this game we are playing. “Just remember,” I warn, still panting, still burning for his touch. “Payback is Hell.”

His teeth scrape my shoulder. “Looking forward to it, baby,” he rasps. “*More than you can possibly know.*”

<https://www.lisareneejones.com/the-inside-out-series.html>



Don’t forget, if you want to be the first to know about upcoming books, giveaways, sales and any other exciting news I have to share please be sure you’re signed up for my newsletter! As an added bonus everyone receives a free ebook when they sign-up!

<http://lisareneejones.com/newsletter-sign-up/>

excerpt from the savage trilogy



He's here.

Rick is standing right in front of me, bigger than life, and so damn him, in that him kind of way that I couldn't explain if I tried. He steps closer and I drop my bag on the counter. He will hurt me again, I remind myself, but like that first night, I don't seem to care.

I step toward him, but he's already there, already here, right here with me. I can't even believe it's true. He folds me close, his big, hard body absorbing mine. His fingers tangle in my hair, his lips slanting over my lips. And then he's kissing me, kissing me with the intensity of a man who can't breathe without me. And I can't breathe without him. I haven't drawn a real breath since he sent me that letter.

My arms slide under his tuxedo jacket, wrapping his body, muscles flexing under my touch. The heat of his body burning into mine, sunshine warming the ice in my heart he created when he left. And that's what scares me. Just this quickly, I'm consumed by him, the

princess and the warrior, as he used to call us. My man. My hero. And those are dangerous things for me to feel, so very dangerous. Because they're not real. He showed me that they aren't real.

"This means nothing," I say, tearing my mouth from his, my hand planting on the hard wall of his chest. "This is sex. Just sex. This changes nothing."

"Baby, we were never just sex."

"We are not the us of the past," I say, grabbing his lapel. "I just need—you owe me this. You owe me a proper—"

"Everything," he says. "In ways you don't understand, but, baby, you will. I promise you, you will."

I don't try to understand that statement and I really don't get the chance. His mouth is back on my mouth.

The very idea of forever with this man is one part perfect, another part absolute pain. Because there is no forever with this man. But he doesn't give me time to object to a fantasy I'll never own, that I'm not sure I want to try and own again. I don't need forever. I need right now. I need him. I sink back into the kiss and he's ravenous. Claiming me. Taking me. Kissing the hell out of me and God, I love it. God, I need it. I need *him*.

**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE SAVAGE
TRILOGY HERE:**

<https://www.lisareneejones.com/savage-trilogy.html>

also by lisa renee jones

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*The Master Undone**
*My Hunger**
No In Between
*My Control**
I Belong to You
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Dangerous Secrets
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LILAH LOVE

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Dirty Rich Cinderella Story
Dirty Rich Obsession
Dirty Rich Betrayal
Dirty Rich Cinderella Story: Ever After
Dirty Rich One Night Stand: Two Years Later
Dirty Rich Obsession: All Mine
Dirty Rich Secrets
Dirty Rich Betrayal: Love Me Forever

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One Woman
Two Together

THE SAVAGE TRILOGY

Savage Hunger
Savage Burn
Savage Love

THE BRILLIANCE TRILOGY

A Reckless Note
A Wicked Song (Aug. 2020)
A Sinful Encore (Sept. 2020)

***eBook only**

about the author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Lisa Renee Jones is the author of the highly acclaimed INSIDE OUT series.

In addition to the success of Lisa's INSIDE OUT series, she has published many successful titles. The TALL, DARK AND DEADLY series and THE SECRET LIFE OF AMY BENSON series, both spent several months on a combination of the New York Times and USA Today bestselling lists. Lisa is also the author of the bestselling the bestselling DIRTY MONEY and WHITE LIES series. And will be publishing the first book in her Lilah Love suspense series with Amazon Publishing in March 2018.

Prior to publishing Lisa owned multi-state staffing agency that was recognized many times by The Austin Business Journal and also praised by the Dallas Women's Magazine. In 1998 Lisa was listed as the #7 growing women owned business in Entrepreneur Magazine.

Lisa loves to hear from her readers. You can reach her at www.lisareneejones.com and she is active on Twitter and Facebook daily.